

JOAN CARISBROKE



EMMA JANE WORBOISE

JOAN CARISBROKE.

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EMMA JANE WORBOISE

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JOAN CARISBROKE.

BY

EMMA JANE WORBOISE,

Author of "A Woman's Patience," "The Brudenells of Brude," "Husbands and Wives," "Lady Clarissa," "The Grey House at Endlestone," &c., &c.

"Thy love
Shall chant its own beatitudes
After its own life-working. A child's kiss
Set on thy sighing lips shall make thee glad;
A poor man served by thee shall make thee rich;
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee strong;
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou renderest. Such a crown
I set upon thy head."

MRS. BARRETT BROWNING.

NEW EDITION.

London :

JAMES CLARKE & CO., 13 & 14, FLEET STREET.

JOHN CARISBROKE

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G7J6

1891

JAMES CLARKE & CO. 12 & 14, FLEET STREET, LONDON.

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JOAN CARISBROKE.

CHAPTER I.

NOT WANTED.

It is the day when *she* was born,
A bitter day, that early sank
Behind a purple frosty bank
Of vapour, leaving night forlorn.

It was the last day of a dreary December. The snow-flakes were falling—falling thickly and ceaselessly from a low canopy of dense, grey clouds. Already fields and lawns and garden-paths were smoothly and whitely covered several inches deep; the high roof of the church, seen against a solemn, purplish background, might have been taken for an Alpine ridge; the windward side of the great, square, ivied tower was powdered all over, like the wig of a courtier of the times of the *Grand Monarque*—buttress, battlement, crocket, and gurgoyne had each its own spotless, ever-swelling cushion; and under the shadow of the hoary walls the dead lay sleeping beneath their newly-spread, colourless, cold pall.

Mutely the pure flakes fell on the neglected hillocks where the paupers slept their last long sleep, heedless alike of penury and toil; silently they gathered on the flowery, grassy mounds that were duly tended by loving, reverent hands; softly they lay on crumbling headstones and mossy tablets and venerable, half-obliterated epitaphs, of a day fast fading into oblivion; and gently they descended on marble slab and sculptured tracery and gilt lettering—the proud *In Memoriam* of yesterday.

Heavily, too, they weighed down the drooping branches of the graceful birch; lovingly they clung to the glossy

leaves of the hardy evergreens ; weirdly they lay in masses on the gaunt arms of sturdy oaks and "immemorial elms" ; and softly they alighted on the ancient yew that overshadowed the lych-gate.

Not far from the church was the Rectory, its grounds on one side being divided from the churchyard by a broad belt of flourishing, trim shrubbery, and by an iron wicket-gate. On the other side were the undulating glebe meadows, and several acres of rich, ploughed land—also glebe ; beyond were rising woods, full of shade and lovely greenery and song in the sweet summer-time, but now all dank and misty and silent, and lost in that peculiar purplish haze which one never sees but in midwinter and when snow is in the air and on the ground. Smooth-shaven lawns and well-kept slopes and flower-beds were before the front windows of the Rectory, and at its sides were stretches of fair garden-ground—ornamental *parterre* and useful kitchen-plot ; and further back, verging on the meadows, a stretch of half-cultivated land, commonly known as The Wilderness. Behind the house were kitchen, poultry, and stable-yards—even a small rick-yard ; also outhouses, sheds, and sties, which proclaimed the Rector to be, as rural rectors frequently are, a farmer, in a certain dignified, amateur sort of way.

The Rectory itself was a large and handsome house, not old enough to be antique and probably uncomfortable, not new enough to distress its æsthetic owner with an air of impertinent, spick-span freshness. It was evidently well kept up ; the present owner need not fear a probable "dilapidation suit" brought against his heirs, for, indeed, the Rev. Francis Carisbroke would leave his rectory in better condition than he found it. He had papered and painted righteously, at proper intervals, as a life-tenant should ; he had replaced certain old casements with modern plate-glass sashes ; he had seen to the roof, and duly attended to the chimneys ; he had taken a pride in the gardens, added to the convenience of the kitchen and out-offices, and greatly improved the land.

Let us look at him, as he sits in his warm, well-furnished library, his feet on a Persian carpet, his elbows resting on the littered table before him, his face wearing an odd

expression of mingled anxiety and annoyance. The room wore an air of snugness and comfort that contrasted pleasantly with the snowy world outside; the blazing fire was reflected in the glass doors and mahogany fronts of well-filled bookcases; the crimson curtains that draped the large bay-windows were rich and ample; double doors shut out all the noise and bustle of the house; and all around were strewn costly objects for common use, as walnut-wood paper-racks and envelope-cases, ormolu and crystal inkstands, finely-carved brackets, a timepiece in malachite and black marble, jewelled spill-cups, a splendid Dresden vase, and two or three good pictures, that "would be always worth their money," according to experts.

The Rev. Francis Carisbroke must have been quite five-and-fifty years of age. He was a tall, straight, well-knit man, not at all stout, but of undeniably fine build; his hair, still plentiful and curly, was of a uniform iron grey; his eyes were dark and piercing, his features classical, but stern, and he had a way of firmly compressing his lips, which gave him anything but a prepossessing aspect. He was presumably writing his Sunday's sermons, for his gold pen was behind his right ear; a sheet of paper lay before him on the blotter; on one side was a large Reference Bible, flanked by a small Greek Testament; on the other a volume of Cruden's Concordance, and the "Notes" of some eighteenth-century divine on the Epistles of St. Paul. Was it that his ideas would not flow—that the inclement weather had frozen the genial current of his thoughts? Or was it that something had occurred to disturb his wonted equanimity, to destroy the mental equilibrium so requisite to a well-studied composition, such as the Rector's sermons always claimed to be?

He was still frowning, and fidgeting with his pen, now dipping it into the ink and letting it dry again, now nibbling the handle of it like a hungry mouse, when there came a gentle tap at the door, and there entered a lady "of a certain age," very plainly dressed, and very quiet in her movements, and so much like the Rector that a stranger, seeing them together for the first time, would unhesitatingly have pronounced them to be brother and sister.

"Well, Jane?" And the gold pen, just replenished, fell upon the open page of the daintily-bound Greek Testament. An exclamation of vexation escaped the Rector; indeed, his tongue almost framed one naughty word, as he hastily took up a sheet of blotting-paper, applying it so unscientifically as to make matters worse instead of better. And it was not till the mischief was remedied as far as it could be, and a good deal of regret expressed, that again the words were uttered, with the interrogative inflexion as before—"Well, Jane?"

"It's all over, and there's a little girl!"

"*Bother!*" exclaimed the Rector, fairly losing his temper, and feeling himself most unfairly done by. And he turned to his sister with an air of so much severity that it might have been imagined that she was in some way responsible for the objectionable sex of the unlucky infant whom nobody, not even its own father and mother, wanted.

"It's most unfortunate," resumed the Rector, as Miss Carisbroke made no reply, but looked a little scandalised. She was a very prim old maid, and "*bother*" was such an unecclesiastical, not to say *vulgar*, expletive! And it was spoken so savagely that she fancied it might be taken as proxy for something worse than vulgar, and far more unecclesiastical. "It's bad enough having to reconstitute a nursery at all! It's sufficiently annoying to be troubled in this way at our age, and after all these years! but I could have borne it patiently had it been a boy! A berth can always be found for a boy; by the time he is sixteen or seventeen he can generally earn salt to his porridge, if he is good for anything; though neither boys nor girls are nowadays what they used to be in our time, Jane. But a girl—another girl! a sixth daughter. As if I hadn't my quiver full twelve years ago, when that puling little Susie died."

"It seems to me that you are arraigning Providence," said Miss Carisbroke, quietly. "God sent this child to you for good purposes, doubtless, and you are bound to give it a paternal welcome. And as for its being a girl, so much the better. Boys, as I have good reason to know, cost an immensity before they can earn even a pinch of salt

to the necessary porridge, about which they are, as a rule, disgustingly fastidious. Remember your own expenses. I don't forget how Annie and I had to pinch to pay your debts at Oxford; how we drank milk and water and weak tea, that you might give your wine parties; how we walked in the mud and dust and grudged even an omnibus fare, that the bill for your hired horses should not go unpaid; how we wore common prints and cheap alpacas, that you might always appear, morning, noon, and night, dressed as a gentleman! And we washed at home, too—and that's about the deepest depth to which a respectable family can sink—just to save——”

“For mercy's sake, do stop, Jane! It cannot possibly interest me to hear of your being ill-dressed five-and-thirty years ago; and as for such vulgar details as the family washing——”

But steadily Jane pursued, “And then, when we had paid the last farthing of those horrible, extortionate bills, Ralph began his career, and followed suit to the best of his ability; and now your own and only son seems likely to rival his father and uncle in the wild extravagance of his expenditure. Why all your five girls put together, to say nothing of the poor little bundle of humanity upstairs, cost you less than Mr. Frank, I know.”

The Rector groaned; his sister had touched upon a very sore subject. His son—his only one, as you have heard—was just then causing him a great deal of trouble. He was graduating at Oxford, with a view to “entering the Church”; and the very ample allowance which his father had with some difficulty granted him had all melted away like butter in the sun. It had just served, in fact, for *impromptu menus plaisirs*—for mere pocket-money. It had gone to pay for sundry items which could scarcely be included in “the account”—for boating expenses, college fines, tips to servants, articles of *virtu*, for he inherited the artistic tastes of his father; so that when, after his first Long Vacation, he returned to his college, and found a heap of tradesmen's remembrancers on his table, there was literally nothing in the purse wherewith to meet them. And now the imprudent young man had contrived to get into the clutches of the money-lenders, and his debts were

larger and more numerous than ever. Truly, the Rector had not much to say in answer to his sister.

When she had been silent for about half a minute, he went on, in a less imperious tone, "Well, it is useless to discuss that point. Boys and girls are both expensive, there is no denying it; and as I have had a family, and you have not, it must be conceded that I am the better judge. It all comes to this, however; if anything happened to me, you know Frank could turn to and get his own living *somehow*. Having sown his wild oats, he would probably do very well; while the girls would have nothing but their mother's money, and what would that be among five of them?—among *six*, I ought to say. I forget the claims of the new arrival."

"They may marry; some of them surely will."

"Or they may not. There is not as much beauty among the lot of them as sometimes falls to the share of a single girl; they are not particularly clever, and they won't have much money—perhaps none at all, if our income keep to the rule of subtraction, and our expenses to that of multiplication. How's Louisa?"

"You might have asked that question before, Francis," replied Miss Carisbroke, in a reproving tone. "We are rather anxious about her."

"Anxious! Dear me! I hope nothing has gone wrong," said the Rector, rising to his feet.

He was by no means a devoted husband, having made what he called "a prudent marriage," in which love had no great share, and expediency much; but he was not altogether heartless, and he cherished a mild affection for the mother of his seven children, and earnestly hoped she was in no kind of danger.

Miss Carisbroke could give him no satisfactory information; she only knew that the doctor and the nurse wore very grave countenances, and that she herself had been turned out of the room.

"I'll go and see her at once," said the husband, suddenly awakened to anxiety.

"No, you mustn't; she is to be kept perfectly quiet; if the baby cries, it is to be taken away."

"And doesn't it cry?"

"It doesn't utter a sound. It's quite alive, but it lies as still and mute as a doll."

"Dear me! I hope it's not *dumb*!"

"I hope not. Don't be alarmed. I dare say it will make amends presently. We shall have plenty of opportunities of admiring the strength of its lungs, I have no doubt. When once it begins, it will squall night and day."

"Heaven forbid!" said the Rector, quite piously. "But seriously, Jane, I am distressed not to hear a good account of Louisa. I must obtain further particulars."

And the sermon had no more chance for that day—no, nor for several days to come; for before many hours had passed the Curate had received directions to keep himself in readiness to preach both morning and evening on the ensuing Sunday. The unwelcome baby became doubly and trebly unwelcome when it was discovered that the life of the mother was in jeopardy.

Mr. Carisbroke had been one of those young men who are said to be "well-connected," and who "enter the Church," or take holy orders, or whatever you choose to call it, as a *profession*, and not at all as a vocation. He would very much have preferred the army; but having distant relations from whom preferment might reasonably be expected, and no hope of military advancement, it was decided, when he was scarcely fifteen years of age, that he should be a clergyman. So, after the usual preparation, he was ordained a *deacon*, "according to the order of the United Church of England and Ireland," and he affirmed before God that he trusted he was "inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost" to take upon himself that office and ministration, and that he thought he was "truly called according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ and the due order of this realm to the ministry of the Church."

A friend of his late father's gave him "a title for orders," and he comported himself, as this gentleman's curate, so as to gain the respect of his superiors in office. A year elapsed, and again he was presented to the Bishop, this time ostensibly to *receive the Holy Ghost*, "for the office and work of a priest in the Church of God."

Francis Carisbroke was by no means the sort of person

to bring disgrace "upon the cloth"; on the contrary, he was—in the world's estimation, at least—a credit to his profession. His college debts hampered him for a good while; but he took pupils, was allowed to inhabit his incumbent's vicarage, and came in for a good many privileges which do not generally fall to the lot of curates. Lastly, some one left him a welcome legacy, and he got free of his debts—very much to his honour—for when every creditor was satisfied very little remained of the bequest. He had more than average abilities, and he might certainly have made a figure in the world had he not been constitutionally indolent, and far too fond of ease to push his way, even when what is called chance seemed to make things comparatively easy to him.

But success, as regards earthly prosperity, appears to come to some men, whether they seek it or not. Certainly Mr. Carisbroke never strove for anything, and yet everything tumbled, as it were, into his lap! He was born under a lucky star, said some people; he had a fairy god-mother, remarked others, as one piece of good fortune after another fell to his share. And really it did seem as if the blind goddess treated him with most exceptional indulgence. He had a certain gift of eloquence; he was affable in his manners to his inferiors; he had the credit of extensive learning; there was no slur on his character, and he was, as a young man, remarkably handsome. He had no particular opinions; he had æsthetic tastes, but he was not at all Ritualistic; he belonged to no particular party, and kept himself aloof from any kind of declaration of his principles. He read the Athanasian Creed without any scruples of conscience; but he cared nothing about the "Eastward position," or daily services, or intoning the prayers, or anything of that sort; he believed in *short*, well-delivered sermons, he liked a well-conducted service, and he had a great idea of the respect due to his position.

He soon obtained "a living" of moderate value, and after a few years of placid contentment, he was, rather to his own surprise, presented with the wealthy benefice of Perrywood, not many miles from the fashionable town of Cotswoldbury. How it all came about he never could exactly tell; he had certainly done nothing to deserve it,

and there were others who by good rights should have been preferred before him. The fact was, the nobleman in whose gift was this nice, fat, comfortable "living," had just returned from a lengthened residence abroad, and being called suddenly to dispense his patronage, gave it to the first person who seemed eligible. He liked Mr. Carisbroke's pleasing manners and gentlemanly appearance; his sermons were good, without rousing any unpleasant trains of thought; he had refined tastes; his views were "sound,"—whatever that might mean—and he was generally approved by society.

So Francis Carisbroke resigned his suburban charge near London, and became a country rector, and presently a rural dean, in a good neighbourhood, where there was "excellent sport," with a substantial rectory in the best repair, a moderate amount of work, £1,200 a-year, and next to no Dissenters. He was now over thirty, and it behoved him to marry. And here again his lucky star was in the ascendancy. He met with a young lady who was the happy possessor of £700 per annum in her own right. She was an orphan, and an only child; she had distant relations, who were both tradespeople and Dissenters, and whom she consequently ignored. She was not pretty, and she was certainly not clever; she played a little, she sang a little, she sketched a little, and she pattered a little bad French and some worse Italian, as was the fashion with boarding-school misses of that period. She had never been in love with anybody except herself, but she scorned the idea of being an "old maid"; she was twenty-one and her own mistress, and she had always made up her mind that she would marry a clergyman provided one could be found who was neither poor nor fond of work, and who was sufficiently good-looking!

Francis Carisbroke fulfilled all these conditions; he was delicately advised that if he proposed to Louisa Patterson, he would not be refused, and he began to think he could not possibly do better. It was high time he married, and he had been weak enough to fall in love with a lovely girl, the sister of one of his curates, who was of a good but extremely impoverished family. He was sorely tempted to take this fair young creature to his heart and home;

but *prudence forbade!* She had no fortune, and would never have any, and, really, £1,200 a-year was not so much for a married clergyman in aristocratic society—a clergyman, too, always had so many claims upon his benevolence! Lily Craven had nothing but her sweet face and her still sweeter disposition; Louisa Patterson had an income of her own, and would pay her share of household and family expenses. Francis looked to the future, when sons and daughters might have claims upon his pocket, when increasing years should call for increasing luxuries, and *prudence* won the day. There was a short engagement, which both parties found extremely uninteresting, and then a marriage, which was pronounced by “society” at large to be a most satisfactory alliance.

Well, I cannot say it was *un-satisfactory*, for neither husband nor wife demanded what the other could not give. They never quarrelled; on the contrary, they passed for “an attached couple.” Probably they cared for each other as much as persons of their calibre could care. A family came quickly—too quickly for a couple who professed not to like children. When a seventh child was born, Mr. Carisbroke thought he had his quiver quite too full; and when the little girl died of suppressed measles, both parents were wonderfully resigned.

After baby Susie’s demise, came a quiet interval of twelve years, during which time no cradle was rocked at Perrywood Rectory. The confidential nurse left for a home of her own, and her place was not filled up; gradually the nursery was merged into the schoolroom; the eldest son, Frank, grew up and went to Oxford, and, as you have heard, sowed a fine crop of wild oats without any delay. The two elder girls were supposed to be “out,” though they still took occasional lessons from Miss Martin, the governess who had undertaken to educate the three younger Misses Carisbroke.

When the youngest of all, Joan, was just turned of thirteen, people were very much mystified by certain changes at the Rectory. The nursery was, to some extent, “reconstituted,” as Mr. Carisbroke said; and on the last day of the year, when the snow was on the ground, and the wind was howling and wailing like a despairing banshee, the

child, whom nobody wanted, came into the world; and the wife and mother, who was in some sort wanted, went out of it.

The girls in the schoolroom sat round the fire and cried, and talked in whispers about "poor mamma." Miss Carisbroke—"Aunt Jane," as everybody called her—took command of the nursery; and "poor papa" shut himself up in the library, and would admit no one.

The bell in the ivied tower began to toll, and the snow fell thicker and faster than ever, and the cold grew more and more severe.

"So miserable," cried the shivering Lavinia, the eldest of the sisters. "Netta, poke the fire, *do!* I shouldn't wonder if that wretched little baby doesn't die of the cold!"

"Serve it right for coming when it was not wanted," said Maggie, tartly. "A baby with grown-up brothers and sisters is just absurd."

"An inconsistency, an anomaly!" assented Lavinia. "Dear me, I hope no one will expect me, as eldest exemplary daughter, to be mother to this child! I shall find quite enough to do without interfering with the nursery. I shall have all the duties of the mistress of a household on my shoulders; I shall have to order dinner, and you know how particular papa is! He and poor mamma never fell out except it was over the *menu*, and the cook's deficiencies. And we shall all have to comfort papa, you know, especially you and I, Maggie; for Netta and Brenda and Joan will be busy with their lessons; they must take every advantage of their good fortune in having a governess like Miss Martin, at the same time so competent and so *expensive!*"

"*We* never had a governess who cost more than £40 a year," grumbled Maggie, who was always cross and spiteful in very bad weather. She was the second Miss Carisbroke, aged seventeen; Lavinia was two years her senior; Frank, who was on a visit, keeping Christmas with some gay friends of his, had lately attained his majority. Netta and Brenda were twins, and were not quite fifteen. Joan was almost thirteen and a half. The baby, as yet nameless, counted her age by hours.

Netta and Brenda both began to sob. They always did everything together, and were so much alike that for the convenience of others they were generally dressed—like Giroflé and Giroflà—the one in blue, and the other in pink. They were like the rest of the family, fond of their ease; and the idea of working hard for at least a couple of years under this superior, energetic governess, who on principle waged war on their indolent habits and inborn manner of shirking difficulties, distressed them exceedingly.

Joan never spoke; she sat knitting her brows, and toasting her feet on the fender. She was tall, very tall, for her age, and thin; consequently awkward. The twins were short and plump and fair, with large, expressionless blue eyes and sandy hair—which was flatteringly described as “golden.” They inherited their mother’s charms, such as they were; she had been very much like a stumpy wax doll in the days of her youth; of late years the pink and white of her complexion, the light blue of her eyes, and her “golden” hair, had all assumed a dull, washed-out appearance; she had grown extremely stout, and languid and lazy in the extreme; the smallest exertion had come to be a nuisance to her; she had not even the energy to amuse herself. The torpor of her existence was a marvel to those who were not accustomed to her ways, and Netta and Brenda partook largely of their mother’s constitution and temperament.

“Don’t scowl so, Joan,” said Lavinia, sharply; “and how you are poking; what would Miss Martin say?”

“It’s quite time Joan went to bed,” put in Maggie, in her most peremptory tone. “She has got into shocking habits since the holidays commenced. Children, be off to bed immediately—all three of you! it’s past ten o’clock.”

The twins shrugged their shoulders and sat still. Joan got up, and without a word or glance left the room. She was accustomed to be snubbed and “sat upon” by every one in the house, and she never seemed to mind it.

“What a queer child Joan is!” said Lavinia, when the door had closed upon her. “She hasn’t shed a tear the whole evening, and I don’t believe she has spoken one word! So unnatural at her age.”

“She has not a bit of feeling, that is what it is,”

retorted Maggie. "I can't think where she gets her disposition from; *we* are none of us sulky as she is."

"Do let us have some supper," cried Brenda.

"Yes; let's have some supper," responded Netta. Then both remarked, in a sort of duet, "that cook might warm some mince pies in the oven."

CHAPTER II.

THE WATCH BY THE DEAD.

"For peace and hope may brighten
And patient love may glow,
As we listen in the starlight
To the 'bells across the snow.'"

JOAN, however, did not go to bed, though she so unhesitatingly quitted the society of her sisters. The schoolroom was in the western wing, the oldest, and, as some people averred, the most comfortable part of Perrywood Rectory. A dimly-lighted passage led into the larger corridor, on which opened all the principal chamber doors, excepting two, which were one on each side of a roomy, square recess built over the porch below, and lighted by a large oriel window of stained glass.

At one of these doors Joan stopped and listened. All was silent within and without; the feathery flakes still filled the icy air, the cold was more intense than ever; a profound hush, broken only by the fitful sobbing of the wind, seemed to fill the house. The child—for what else could you call her at her years, unchildlike as she was in character?—shivered, hesitated visibly, and then shivered again. "*Shall I go in?*" she asked herself, in an awed, subdued whisper; she was very much addicted to talking to herself, even holding conversations, as it seemed, with some invisible person, who took an opposite view of the

questions debated within her mind. "Shall I or shall I not? There can be no reason why I should not, if I please! No one has forbidden me, and it would be all the same if they had. What I choose to do I will do. Am I afraid? Why should I be? Is she not the very same she was last night, when I went in to see her, only that she cannot look at me, nor hear me, nor speak a word to me? I never saw a dead person in my life, and I should like to. I heard Lavinia tell Maggie she would not sleep alone for anything, and Maggie said, 'Of course not, we'll be together.' And Netta and Brenda always are together; it is only I who am alone. I am the odd one! That's it, I suppose; the others go in pairs, and there's no one left for me. How I do wish little Susie had lived. I know she would have been my own sister; we should have understood each other perfectly, and have done everything together, as Netta and Brenda and the elders do. There's this new baby, that nobody seems to want, but she will be of no use to me, I am so much older—almost grown-up. I wish she had not been *she*! I should have liked another brother—Frank's no good; he treats me as if I were a child! Yes; it would have been nice to have a little brother all to myself; he might—he certainly *might* have come to be very fond of me. Another sister is only a nuisance. Now, *shall* I go in? I am not afraid—no, not a bit! I know Netta and Brenda would as soon go alone into the church yonder, as stand here in the dark. There's a light inside, for I can see the glimmer under the door. Here goes."

And very gently, as gently as if she feared to disturb the sleeper within, she turned the handle. Ah! but the door was locked. She did not know whether to feel baffled or relieved! And why should dead people be locked up? she asked herself, knitting her dark brows, and wrinkling her nose in that peculiar fashion, which caused her to be generally accredited with scowling and sneering on the smallest provocation, or with none at all.

"I might, perhaps, get in through the dressing-room," she resumed, in the same dull *sotto voce*; "I think, at any rate, I'll try; I may not have the chance to-morrow. But why should the door be locked? Are people afraid that—

that *she* should come out, and startle them? Well! it *would* be startling. I should be startled myself, and I dare-say I should scream, though I hate people that scream! But then, that would show there was a mistake—that she was not dead, only in a faint, or in a trance, like what I have read about. I wonder how long people stay in trances! Suppose mamma should be in one! How horrible it would be! Yes, I must go in. I feel sure I shall know at once if she is really *quite* dead. It's my duty to go; if I don't, I shall always think that perhaps I might have saved her, and didn't."

So, softly and stealthily, Joan groped her chilly way along the dark corridor. The dressing-room door was wide open, and the embers of a low fire were still smouldering in the grate. The blind was not drawn down, the wash-stand was in disorder; clearly the housemaid had not paid her customary visit that evening. Oh, how the wind moaned in the chimney! how weirdly the snow flashed and flitted past the window-pane! and how bitterly cold it was! But the door that opened into the bedroom was close shut, and—yes, that, too, was locked!

"What *do* they do it for?" muttered Joan, impatiently. And then, in the pale glimmer of snow-light and fire-light, she perceived that the key had not been taken away. Without giving herself time for reflection, she turned it, and went in, and once again was in the familiar room, where last night she had kissed her mother, sitting in her easy-chair and talking to old Nurse Barnard, who several days before had arrived, as it would appear, on a visit to the Rectory. Two tall candles were burning on a marble table near the bed, there was no longer any fire in the grate, the hearth was swept and duly laid in order, as, indeed, was everything else in the chamber. All the chairs were put back in their places, the toilet-table neatly arranged and covered with a clean cloth, the books and other articles which were generally scattered about no longer to be seen. The room had a desolate, uninhabited aspect, and it felt colder there, Joan thought, than out in the draughty passages.

She almost repented that she had ventured. Her knees trembled, and a cold sweat broke over her from head to

foot. She had never felt so oddly in all her life ; she wondered if this were faintness. That would not do, on any account. Suppose she were found "lifeless on the floor," like a heroine in a novel ! She would never hear the last of it. So, with one mighty effort, she braced herself to approach the bed, and look upon the still, white figure lying on the mattress. With something like a shudder she turned back the sheet, and there lay—*what ?* Surely not the mother of whom she had so carelessly taken leave last night. The lips were grey, the features pinched and drawn, the whole countenance changed. Death was so legibly inscribed on the rigid, pallid face that Joan never once reverted to the wild hope that had visited her on the other side of the door. This was not sleep, oh, no ! nor a swoon, nor even a trance ; this was death itself, without the possibility of mistake. Joan just touched the forehead ; the snow on the graves outside could scarcely be colder, she thought. She began to speak to herself : "This is mamma, and yet it is not ! They will put this thing into the ground, out of sight—they must, *or else !*" and again she shuddered, and turned sick. "But where is *she ?* Has she gone straight up to heaven, I wonder ? Did she *wake* and find herself there ? or did her spirit go out of her, and fly through the storm, away—away, to wherever the other world is ? I wish I knew ; for some day I shall have to go too. Some day *I* shall lie like this, cold and white, and all alone, and *locked in*, I suppose ; and somebody will come and look at *me*, and shiver at the sight. But I don't think I shall be there ; I should not know if they insulted the poor thing they called Joan Carisbroke ; I should neither know nor care, for *I*, the real self, that think and feel, would be gone—*gone where ?* Why, gone to God, of course. Oh, but that is dreadful, for I have done so many things to make Him angry. What is the good of living, if life is to end like that ? Oh ! I want to know so many things. Oh ! mamma, mamma, why can't you come back and tell me ? tell me what it is to die, and how one feels the moment one is dead, and what there is beyond ? But you can't, you can't ! Nobody ever did come back to those they left behind."

And then Joan thought again of the mother she had seen last, sitting in that very chair on the other side of the bed. She and the nurse were talking earnestly together when she came in, and she knew that she interrupted their discourse, and that they would resume it as soon as she left the room. So she did not linger, though her mother, she thought, was kinder than usual, for she kissed her twice and patted her cheek, and said, not angrily, "My naughty Joan ought to be in bed and fast asleep." And then she burst into an agony of tears, and sobbed again and again, "Mamma! mamma!" as if her heart would break; and all the time she knew that she was calling not to the white, cold form stretched before her, but to the warm, loving, sentient woman, whose kiss had fallen upon her lips, and who had called her "naughty Joan" no later than last night.

Mrs. Carisbroke had never been an extremely affectionate mother, any more than she had been a devoted wife. If she had any passion of love at all, it was poured out upon her first-born and only son—the scapegrace Frank; also for her daughter Lavinia she had an especial *tendresse*, such as it was. But, somehow, the maternal sentiment seemed to decline as the number of her children increased, and for Joan she had never manifested more than a kindly feeling. With regard to the unfortunate baby so lately arrived upon this mortal scene, she had anticipated its arrival with feelings the reverse of pleasurable, and had duly commiserated herself on the unwelcome dispensation.

And yet she had always been spoken of as "Such an excellent wife!" "Such an exemplary mother!" The sort of women of which Louisa Carisbroke was a type generally does secure the suffrages of the multitude, especially of mere outsiders, who are, of course, unaware of her many failings and shortcomings. Had she been a poor woman, it is difficult to say what might have been the opinion of her neighbours; as it was, she was supposed to be a good manager because things, as a rule, worked smoothly; but in reality the house managed itself, and schoolroom, nursery, and kitchen went very much as they were inclined—and, as very often happens in these cases, the inclination, for the most part, was towards a steady, dull, lumbering sort of respectability.

You will understand, therefore, that Mrs. Carisbroke's little daughter evinced quite as much filial emotion as could be well expected of her, if not a little more. Joan was one of those children whom people called "strange," not particularly naughty, though sufficiently troublesome to need incessant reprimands, and, certainly, not particularly good. Also, it would appear that she had, as sometimes happens, inherited the disposition of grandparents or more remote ancestors, or even of collateral kindred, rather than that of her immediate progenitors; for she was not like either father or mother, and was said in the family "to take after nobody."

Joan was roused by the church clock striking eleven, and wondered that she had not been missed, and sought for. Surely, by this time Netta and Brenda had gone to bed, and her little room communicated with their larger one, and the same maid waited upon them all. Perhaps, all in the house, save herself, had retired; and she trembled at the idea of finding her way to her own quarters, through all those long, dark passages, alone. She was very cold, and she had had no supper, her feelings had been unwontedly stirred, and altogether she was unnerved. Suddenly she started, for she heard a footfall very near at hand, and, though unusually soft, she knew it for her father's. She stood greatly in awe of him; without exactly knowing why—for he was never really unkind to her—she always tried to escape his presence, except in the midst of the family circle; she could not recollect that she had ever, in all her existence, spent five minutes with him alone; and that he should find her here was a *contre-temps* for which she was wholly unprepared.

She heard him enter the dressing-room, and gently poke the dying fire, as if he tried to revive its almost extinguished flame; his movements, she thought, were unwontedly quiet. Was he coming in? What would he say to her? Would he be extremely angry? And yet, what harm had she done by coming in to look at her dead mother? Another moment and he pushed open the door, which she had left ajar. He was evidently surprised to find it unlocked, for under his breath he uttered a slight exclamation. Without a moment's thought she yielded

to the instinct which prompted her to hide, and shrank away behind the heavy curtain, where she faintly hoped she might escape observation.

No sooner, however, had she done so, than she felt her mistake. How could she now disclose herself, and what right had she to be there in hiding, and behold the display of her father's most private feelings? A frightened bashfulness kept her motionless; honour and good-sense prompted her at once to reveal her presence. She only wondered that the loud beating of her heart did not betray her.

Mr. Carisbroke advanced to the bedside and sighed heavily. He, too, turned back the sheet from the cold, dead face, and he sighed again—this time almost with a sob. "Louisa, Louisa! my poor Louisa!" he murmured; "how little I thought of this! how could I dream that before night you would leave me? My poor wife!"

And his daughter knew that he was shedding tears. Oh, what would he say, what would he do, if he found out that she was the witness of his sorrow! She felt quite aghast; she longed to avow herself, and yet dared not stir; a spell seemed to be on her, that would neither let her speak nor move; she could not even draw back into the deeper shadow of the curtain, her very blood seemed freezing.

He said no more, but she listened to sob after sob. She had not supposed that a man could weep; she believed instinctively in the saying that

"Men must work,
And women must weep,"

for often she had seen her mother cry when poorly or low-spirited, and Aunt Jane and her sisters had cried dismally that very evening; but never had she imagined the strong man's anguish finding vent in tears. She wanted to cry with him; she wanted to go and put her arms round his neck and comfort him; she felt towards him as she had never felt before; but she dared not, could not stir; she began to wonder stupidly whether, after all, it was a dreadful dream, and this a nightmare from which she might by an effort free herself. How long would he stay

there? Would he come round to that side of the bed? And—oh! horror of horrors!—would he lock the door behind him when he went away, leaving her alone all night with the newly dead? She felt that if he did so, she must scream aloud; she would lose her senses if she had to stay there till the morning. What would she not have given to have been safe in her own little room, at the top of the house, within hearing of Netta's and Brenda's gentle breathing, and the servants close at hand!

Would he never go? How long was this all but unbearable tension to continue? His sobs had ceased; he was still as the dead woman before him. Joan peeped forth a little from the shadow, and saw that he was on his knees. He was saying his prayers, then—saying them where, of course, he had said them night after night for ever so many years. This was worse still, for she knew intuitively that of all men her father would least brook intrusion on such privacy as this. And in her growing extremity and terror she gave an involuntary gasp.

In a moment he was on his feet, crying out, "What is that? Who is there? Who is there? I say."

It would be difficult to tell which face wore the deadlier hue—the manly one at the other side of the bed, or the small, thin, sallow one cowering behind the curtain. But all pretence of concealment was over, for, the spell once broken, the child's sobs came loud and fast, and in another minute her father was at her side.

"*You* here, Joan!" he exclaimed, in profoundest amazement. He was so unhinged, he could not say another word.

Then Joan broke out into passionate lamentations. "Oh, I am so sorry!—so sorry! I never meant to—indeed, I didn't. Please forgive me, papa! I never thought of your finding me here. Only I couldn't help coming in. I wished her good-night last night, and she sat in that chair!"

There was an unconscious pathos in Joan's words that entirely dissipated her father's anger, if, indeed, he had felt any.

"Poor child," he said, in tones that surprised his daughter

quite as much as his previous tears. "How long have you been here?"

"I don't know; a good while, I think. Oh, why did mamma go away?"

"God called her," said the clergyman, solemnly. "When He wills it, we must each in our turn depart. Don't cry so, Joan; she is happier where she is."

But Mr. Carisbroke was himself crying. The sight of his child's tears, and her uncontrollable distress, moved him deeply. He did what he had never done before, took the slender form in his arms, and kissed the sallow face. He held her closely to him, and wiped away her tears. Joan had lost her mother. Could it be that she had found her father?

"Come with me," he said at length. "You must not stay any longer here. Say good-bye to *her*, for it is better that you should not come back again." And then, with his arm still encircling her shoulders, he led her downstairs into the library, where there was still a good fire, and placed her in the armchair, and told her to warm her ice-cold hands, while he mixed her some hot sherry-negus.

"Now go straight to bed," he said kindly, when she had emptied the glass, in obedience to his command. "I cannot think what they are all about, letting you wander through the house in this fashion, when they ought to have seen you safely in your bed hours ago. Where are your sisters?"

"I don't know. I left them all in the schoolroom. Maggie told me to go to bed."

"Quite right. And why did you not do as you were told?"

"Because—I wanted to go into that room just for five minutes. And it was some time before I could make up my mind to do it, and when once there, I don't know how it was—I suppose I stayed too long—and then you came and——"

"Why did you hide yourself, Joan?"

"I was afraid you would be angry. I did it in a moment, without thinking, and afterwards I dared not speak."

"You should have spoken. Never be afraid to do the right thing. Suppose I had not found you out, and locked you in for the night?"

"Ah!"—with a little shiver, and again she drew nearer to him.

"There! go to bed. I declare, there are the bells—a muffled peal, of course. Good-night, my dear, you have a little colour in your face now, and your hands are almost warm."

"Are you not going to bed, papa?"

"Presently; I shall sleep in the green-room, I believe. But I shall see the New Year in first. I have done so all my life. Ah! what a New Year! This is a sad beginning for you and for me, poor child—for all of us!"

"And that new little baby!"

"Don't speak of it! I can't bear to think of it! Your mamma might be here now, if—if—— There, we will say no more about it. We were quite content with you for our baby, Joan; we wanted no more pannikins and cradles. Once more, my dear, Good-night."

And Joan understood that this dismissal was final. Not for worlds would she anger her father now, when he had been so kind to her, and when he was in so much trouble. She found a candle on the hall table, lighted it, and stole away very quietly to her own little attic. All was very still; she fancied that but for her father keeping watch in the library, she might be the last up in the house. There was, however, a group of half-frightened servants sitting round the kitchen-fire, drinking mulled elderberry-wine, and seeing the Old Year out, but that Joan could not know.

Brave as she was, she rejoiced to find herself at last at her room door. She looked into the adjoining chamber. Netta and Brenda were fast asleep, clasped in each other's arms, the traces of tears still on their rosy cheeks. Either they had never discovered her absence, or they had not troubled themselves to account for it. She felt rather sad to think that no one missed her. Lavinia would have missed Maggie; Netta and Brenda always went or stayed together; she alone belonged to no one in particular. Now poor mamma was gone she was not much more wanted than the unwelcome baby. Ah! but she forgot papa had

been so very, very kind ; perhaps he did care for her a little, awkward and dull and ugly as she was ! For Joan really believed in her own ugliness, and sighed for the pink and white plumpness of the twins, for Lavinia's graceful figure, and for Maggie's classic nose.

And, truth to tell, my heroine was by no means a beauty. "So ungainly," old Nurse had called her ; "so uncouth," her poor mother had said ; "so unlucky," the servants remarked, for she had a knack of breaking or spoiling nearly everything she handled. Oddly enough, she was more like her father than any of her sisters, yet he was as handsome, or had been a few years ago, as she was plain ! While she slowly undressed, the bells ceased, and almost without a thought she muffled herself up in a large shawl, and opened the small dormer-window looking out into the night.

How solemn it was ! All was hushed as death itself. It had ceased snowing ; but how white and cold looked the shrouded earth in the pale snow-glimmer ! How weirdly showed the graves in the faint and chilly starlight ! Far away there might be—there *must* be life and light and the voice of song and festal joy and revel ; but here all was silence, all was loneliness, and it was easy to comprehend that Time itself was dying. Kneeling with her head bowed on the window-sill, Joan waited for the church-clock—for the knell of the departed year. It came, the first great deep stroke of the twelve—one—two—three ! and she counted them as they fell slowly, almost awfully, upon the midnight stillness. Then it seemed as if the desolate, snow-mantled world held its breath for awe ; only was there the low sigh of the wind far off in the leafless woods, and the echoing reverberation of the clock.

Another minute, and the bells began again ; but not the loud, joyous peal which for many a year they had rung out so merrily over lawn and lea, over wood and water, to welcome in the glad New Year. They rang on muffled and sad—the Old Year's requiem ; and then they ceased, and once more all was death-like silence. As Joan crept shivering to her bed, she felt about five years older than when last she lay down in it.

But she did not feel anything long. Perfectly worn out,

she sank into the deep, untroubled sleep of childhood, and only awoke when Netta and Brenda, already dressed, came scolding her for being so lazy, and with a message from Maggie, that if she did not hurry down, the breakfast would be sent away.

Not one word did Joan say of last night's occurrences. No one ever knew how she and her father had met in the chamber of death, nor how she had kept her midnight watch, listening to the mournful bells across the snow. Her father had not bidden her to be silent; but instinctively she knew he would not like any of his movements talked about; moreover, there was no one with whom she cared to converse on so sacred a subject.

Only, some of the servants said that "Miss Joan looked as if she grieved worse than any one, for all she made no fuss and asked no questions, as the others did!"

CHAPTER III.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS.

"What shall the baby's name be—
Maud, or Minnie, or May?
Shall we call her Rose or Violet,
Or Ruby—or Pearl, I pray?"

THE snow had all melted away, the earth was green again; the river, swollen to a flood, lifted up its voice continually; and Mrs. Carisbroke was buried. At the Rectory events resumed their usual course. The servants no longer crept about the house, as if they feared to disturb their dead mistress; windows were thrown open to admit the January sunshine, the gardener sedulously rolled the walks, the cook scolded in the kitchen, the monthly supply of novels arrived from *Mudic's*, and the young ladies once more unclosed the pianoforte.

And once again Mr. Carisbroke sat in the library, and finished the sermon so mournfully interrupted, and he began to complain that his dinners were not so good as they ought to be; and Aunt Jane and Lavinia had a passage-at-arms as to the vexed question of supremacy. Mr. Frank had, of course, returned home, and had followed his mother to the grave with all due solemnity; but their common bereavement did not seem to have drawn him and his father together; they were evidently at feud, and anxious to avoid each other's society.

As to the baby, it had verified Miss Carisbroke's prophecy, for it cried and wailed and moaned for at least eighteen hours out of the twenty-four; but then the nursery was in an unfrequented part of the house, and it had double-doors; so nobody—one person excepted—cared much for its shrill, weak, piping cries. Nurse Barnard, however, declared that she really could not stop her month, so cross and fractious a child she had never known, and somebody else must be found to take at least part of the responsibility, for the continual loss of her night's rest was making an old woman of her, and unfitting her for her regular duties.

It was a very small specimen of humanity, this latest addition to the Carisbroke family, and for some weeks no one supposed that it would survive—so very feeble was the tiny spark of life within the little shrunken form, that would never be clasped in a fond mother's arms, never be lulled to sleep on a tender mother's breast. Nurse Barnard grew cross and restive, the under-housemaid, who had been pressed into the nursery service, gave notice because she did not like babies, and the kitchenmaid followed suit. Aunt Jane was at her wits'-end to know what to do with the poor pining creature, whom it was decreed should be "brought up by hand."

At length arose the question of the child's name. Mr. Carisbroke had certainly no notion of baptismal regeneration, for he seemed to care little or nothing about his child's presentation at the font, till one day, when it seemed more ailing than usual, it occurred to him that it would be awkward if it died without the performance of the rite. He did not, in his own mind, consign unbaptized

infants to *limbo* ; but he had always set his face against the Christian burial of such luckless little mortals, and it would certainly be somewhat of a scandal if his own babe had to be interred without any sacred ceremony.

"What shall we call it?" asked Aunt Jane, in full family conclave—only the Rector and Joan being absent.

"Anything—Ichabod! Moses!—whatever comes first," irreverently replied the heir and hope of the Carisbrokes, puffing clouds of smoke between the words.

"Nonsense," said Lavinia; "you can't name a girl *Moses*!"

"Why should it have a name at all?" asked Maggie, sleepily. She was curled up on the sofa, taking an afternoon siesta. "If it's going to die, why trouble about its name?"

"We are none of us named Louisa," said one of the twins; as it was getting dark, it was not easy to tell which.

"No; we are none of us named Louisa," echoed the other twin.

"Not to be thought of for a moment," replied Aunt Jane, decisively. "Your papa will never allow the poor baby to have its mother's name. It might be called after me; only there is Joan, who is supposed to be my name-child."

"I say! let's call it Cleopatra, or Ophelia, or—something classic!" put in Frank again, puffing more vigorously than ever. "When is it to be done?"

"To-morrow, I believe. Oh! here is Joan."

Joan walked in more quietly than was her custom. She stood before the window for several minutes, listening to the conversation that was going on. She looked more ungainly than ever in her ill-fitting black dress, which was almost up to her knees, Lavinia and Maggie having insisted on short dresses for "the children," in spite of Aunt Jane's endeavours to array them more decently.

"We never wore long dresses while we were in the schoolroom," said both girls, and as Lavinia gave the orders to the dressmaker, the point was carried, and Joan's lean legs and black stockings were uncomfortably displayed.

"I say, Jo, what a figure you *do* cut!" laughed her brother, as he surveyed the victim of her sister's tyranny. "What a scarecrow you look! Why! you have outgrown your new dress already! Can't it be let down, Lavinia?"

"Little girls always wear short frocks," replied Lavinia, coldly. "Joan, why do you stand on one leg? You will have those shoes down at heel directly, like the last, if you don't take care. It is impossible to keep you tidy. What do you want? I thought I left you in the nursery!"

"I want to tell you that I am to give the baby her name. Papa says so."

For a moment there was breathless silence. If she had declared that Queen Victoria had raised her to the peerage, her auditors could scarcely have been more astonished. Then arose a Babel of exclamations, and an imperative command to explain herself. What *was* she talking about?

"Only about baby's name," she answered, quite unmoved by the shrill chorus of interjections and her elder sister's sharp questionings. "She is to be christened to-morrow, and she can't be christened without a name. And papa said I might call her what I liked, so that it was *not* Louisa!"

"*You* might call her! I never heard anything so absurd! Papa never meant it, you may be certain."

"I think he did; I am quite sure that he did."

"I dare say you went and worried him till he did not know what he was saying. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, teasing poor papa, when he is in so much trouble. He never meant it, so put the nonsense out of your head immediately."

"But he did mean it," persisted Joan, still holding her ground. "I will tell you how it happened. This morning I was feeding my rabbits, and papa came from the stables—he had been to see that roan colt that is going to be sold—and he called to me, and said, 'Joan, that poor little child must be christened; it ought to have been attended to before.' And I said, 'Yes, papa; but what is to be her name?' And he answered in these very words, 'What you like, Joan! *You* shall choose her name,

because you have been more with her than anybody else. Select any name you please—*except* Louisa. I leave it entirely to you.' And then, that there might be no mistake, I asked him if he meant that he left it to *me*—my own self! and he said, 'Yes, yes! You, and no one else—anything you like, from Victoria to Cinderella.' And if you don't believe me, Lavinia, you can go and ask papa."

"The governor must be falling into his dotage," said Frank. "I never knew you were his pet, Joan. I used to be his favourite and darling; but since he discovered that I declined to live on twopence-halfpenny a day, or thereabouts, I have got into his black books. Well, godmother, is it to be Victoria or Cinderella?"

"Neither. And I am not godmother; I can't be, you know; I've never been confirmed."

"What a pity! I should have thought his reverence might have granted a dispensation in your favour. But do say what the little squaller is to be christened!—I am so curious, Joan, and so are the girls and Aunt Jane, only they won't say so. Stop! how many guesses will you give me? Let us have ten a-piece, and the one who guesses rightly shall receive a present from the others, yourself included. There's a lot of things I want before I go back to Oxford."

"You would never guess—it's not a common name. We don't know anybody who has it!"

"Oh, the powers!" drawled Frank, with an Irish accent which he had learned on a recent visit to Dublin. "An' we'll be havin' a misfortunate little sister, with no name at all, at all! Don't say it's Bathsheba, Joan! nor Jochebed, nor Clytemnestra! nor—*Betsy Jane*! I could never bestow my fraternal regards on a Betsy Jane! I know a fellow who is going to marry one, but he always calls her 'Jeanette.' Oh, Joan, do make haste, and dissipate my apprehensions."

"Well, then—it's—Ruby."

"Ruby! There isn't such a name!" cried Lavinia.

"Oh, yes, there is!" interrupted Frank. "It's a fanciful, adapted sort of name, of course; but, still, there are Rubys on the register. I like your choice, Joan; but it's unsuitable."

"How so?"

"A girl named 'Ruby' ought to grow up a beauty; she ought to be born lovely; she ought to be utterly and killingly charming! Whereas, this poor little mite seems more like a changeling brought by the spiteful fairies than a human child. At least, they tell me so. I have not, as yet, paid the youngest princess a visit."

"The baby is *not* ugly!" vehemently asserted Joan. "She will be the flower of the flock—the beauty of the family."

"The *jewel* of it, undoubtedly."

"And," resumed Joan, gathering courage, "I have no doubt that we shall all be proud of her some day. And it's a great shame to speak of her as you do, every one of you! She didn't choose to come herself. God sent her, and we ought to be very glad to have her. She has as much right here, I suppose, as the rest of us."

"Really, Joan, you take a great deal upon yourself, speaking in such a tone," interposed Lavinia, with an air of dignity. "Little girls are not expected to preach to their elders. I am thankful to know that Miss Martin is coming back to-night. You are not fit to be allowed out of the schoolroom. It does not matter about Brenda and Netta, only that they are losing time; but *you* take liberties, and require a tight hand to keep you in order! I shall beg Miss Martin to be extremely strict as regards yourself."

"I shall go into the nursery whenever I like; papa says I may, and it's of no use for Miss Martin, or any one, to interfere!"

"We shall see! Aunt Jane, why don't you reprove Joan for her impertinence?"

"One at a time is surely sufficient; besides, my dear, I thought it was understood that you were Miss Carisbroke, and mistress of the establishment, and, as such, would permit no interference?"

"Nevertheless, you might uphold my authority!"

"Excuse me, my dear, I decline to do anything of the kind. The lady of the house should be a host in herself. A mistress who cannot hold her own is very much like a wife who finds herself compelled—as she avers—to 'stand

upon her rights.' I don't know which of the two is the more to be pitied, and in many cases—despised! I will not help you to form a false estimate of your position, nor will I 'usurp'—it was your own word, if you remember—any rule outside the nursery-door. Until you take my place there, I shall not resign office, and Joan has been my best helper throughout. I think it is only fair that the baby should receive her name from her, for I would not undertake to say that Joan has not saved her life."

"Come, now," drawled Frank again, perceiving the gathering storm, "don't you women pitch into each other like Kilkenny cats! Of course, we know that when two feminines of the human species once take to a quarrel, only two things can stop them—dinner or a thunderstorm. And it's very much to Joan's credit that she is such a brick; only I wish her petticoats were a little longer! If you don't have a care, Lavinia, people will take her for a ballet-girl! Really now, it's not *respectable*!"

The fact being, that both Joan's new mourning dresses were decidedly too short, even for schoolroom wear. There had been some mistake in the measurement, and Lavinia knew it—for it was through a piece of her own carelessness; but obstinate, as small natures invariably are, she refused to own anything which could endorse her own error, and it pleased her to keep Joan well under as "a little girl." She would only reply that she knew what was fit for children!

"*Children*! yes," persisted Frank; "but Joan is scarcely a child now; you can't call her a *little* girl, for she is a big one. Netta and Brenda are not as tall as Joan, and their flounces touch their heels. Of course, young ladies not 'out' are not entitled to tails—or *trains*, as you call them. But, really, decency demands a less liberal display of—*spindle-shanks*!"

And all the while Joan listened, half-ashamed and half-indignant, for the short skirts were a very sore point with herself, as they must ever be with a lanky, overgrown girl, who feels herself far more of a woman than the world about her will concede. Her mother had never petted her, but she had never, on the other hand, exercised over her any arbitrary sway. A month ago she would only have

had to plead, "Mamma, my dress is far too short; may it not be altered?" and a reasonable extension of skirts would have followed. Now, she understood that she was in the power of a petty tyrant, and the more protestation, the worse it would be for her; but secretly she resolved to make her appeal to headquarters if no other remedy remained. Lavinia was determined not to yield; but in her heart of hearts she did wish she had allowed another yard of stuff to Joan's obnoxious skirts.

But just then no more was to be said about them, for Maggie wondered who were to be the baby's godmothers, and Aunt Jane replied that she meant to stand herself, trusting to Miss Martin to be another sponsor. The difficulty was to find a godfather, Mr. Selwyn, the curate, having declined the responsibility, and nobody else, at that moment, appeared eligible.

"Why should not Frank be godfather?" asked Maggie.

"Not if I knows it, my dear," answered Frank, quite as much in earnest as in jest. "I've got sins enow of my own to answer for, without making myself accountable for that midget's till she is confirmed. By the way, Aunt Jane, you are answerable for all Joan's peccadilloes still! Why don't you get her confirmed, and make her take her own sins upon herself?"

"Frank, you are talking great nonsense," said Aunt Jane. "No one ever believed that sponsors really took upon themselves the sins of their god-children. Young or old, we must answer for ourselves, before God. Joan will not be any more answerable for herself after confirmation than she is now—than she has been ever since she was able to distinguish right from wrong. And, Frank, Joan is a good child."

"Is she? Vinny and Maggie give her anything but a delightful character. They say she is sulky, and mulish, and pert, and disobedient, and spiteful, and, indeed, everything she ought not to be. I don't know that she is charged with untruthfulness, or with 'picking and stealing,' as the Catechism says, but she seems to be everlastingly in trouble. And, really, those two elder girls do 'sit upon her,' you know! She can't move but she is blamed; she can't look but she is chidden; she can't speak

but she is snubbed. And it's a shame of Lavinia to dress her like a four-year-old, or a six-feet flunky. She'll get chronic rheumatism before she is sixteen. Why don't you interfere, Aunt Jane?"

"Because I will not. Lavinia has constituted herself sole mistress of the household, and, of course, as eldest daughter, it is her right. She refuses to be advised; she won't hear a word that does not chime in with her own ideas; she intends to carry all before her. I am not going to contend with her. Neither Lavinia nor Maggie will ever condescend to purchase experience second-hand; they are both determined to buy it as dearly as possible. Most young people are of the same mind, I believe."

"You were a 'young person' once yourself, auntie."

"Of course I was! I wasn't born in spectacles, with grey hairs on my head, and wisdom-teeth already in my mouth. But, Frank, in my day things were different. We young ones were fain to do as we were bid, and take what we could get. We did not think that we were Solons and our elders fools. We paid respect where respect was due, and——"

"Now, aunt, spare me that, there's a dear old Jenny Wren! Why, I know it all by heart; and when I am an elderly gentleman I shall exhort the youth of the period, and tell them how, in *my* young days, I and my contemporaries were as good as gold,—obedient to a fault, meek as doves, industrious as busy bees, and never so pleased as when set down to a good meal of that wholesome, though unpalatable, dish—humble-pie! It's the way of humanity to glorify the past and abase the present. Everybody's Golden Age was about forty or fifty years ago. The rising generation is always stiff-necked and rebellious. After—say five-and-forty, one begins intuitively to lament the degeneracy of the times. Oh! won't I lecture my unsatisfactory sons and daughters, and shame them with the record of their father's exalted virtues and patient heroism."

"Your virtues, *your* heroism! Oh, nephew Frank!"

"They are all to come, of course—in *nubibus* at the present moment! And, indeed, Aunt Jane, if the governor would only once set me straight, I'd keep on the square for the future. It doesn't give a fellow a chance, leaving

him to be bothered by creditors, and short of ready-money into the bargain."

"The 'fellow' ought to have no creditors. And I am sure your allowance is a very handsome one, all things considered. I can't think what you do with your money, Frank."

"Women never will believe that an unmarried man can have any expenses. I can't live at Oxford as my father did. I can't be a *scrub*, you know."

"I am afraid I don't know exactly what 'a scrub' is, especially as applied to an undergraduate of Oxford."

"Why, a scrub is a fellow who cares nothing about appearances; who goes in for the cheap and nasty; whose greatest ambition is to live within a paltry income—a fellow without taste, and generally without manners. His chief satisfaction is to be able to 'retire nightly to his virtuous couch,' and reflect upon a day well spent."

"I am not sure, then, but that the scrub is a happier man than those who despise him. Let those laugh who win, young man! And the winning horse is not often the one that thinks of nothing but clover and oats. But seriously, Frank, what are you going to do?"

"Do? What *can* I do but bother his reverence, till he comes down with the needful? He ought to know better than to expect one to make bricks without straw."

"He does not expect anything of the kind, Frank. And you have had your straw, and wasted it. You cannot eat up your cake, like a greedy child, and yet find it when you want it."

"Cake, indeed! It has been very short allowance of *cake* that I have had! And am tired of crust—such dry crust, too, without a bit of butter! Aunt Jane, can't you make my father see things in a proper light?"

"Your father is quite able to judge for himself, Frank; and men, as a rule, don't receive sisterly counsel in good part. Besides, I am not sure what you really want."

"I want my debts paid and my allowance increased; but I'll be thankful to have the old score wiped out, and for the future do the economical. My father declares he won't pay one of my bills; but it is of no use saying *that*. He *must* pay! And in the end, of course, he will; only it's

horribly unpleasant being in such a fix. And, really, I haven't a chance till I can get a little straight."

"Does your father know what your liabilities are?"

"Yes. That is, he knows to within a few pounds. A cool £500 would cover everything. It is not so much for a man to hand over to his only son."

"It is a great deal for your father to find all at once. It is nearly half-a-year's income, Frank; you are extremely selfish."

"Nothing of the kind! The living brings in £1,200 a-year, and there's my poor mother's money, a good £700 more."

"It *was* £700 a-year, Frank; but you Carisbrokes of Perrywood are given to exceeding your incomes. It is barely £500 per annum now; I am not by any means sure that it is so much. Your father himself has expensive tastes, but he has not been a niggard toward his son; and then there are the girls—something should be saved for them. Yes, some of them may marry; but we Carisbroke women are not much addicted to matrimony; and surely, you would not wish your sisters to go to their husbands absolutely empty-handed? It is a mistake, which it is high time society remedied—sacrificing all to the sons of the family. And with people like ourselves it is doubly a mistake; the girls are not provided for, neither are they enabled to provide for themselves. My opinion is that people have no right to bring children into the world, and leave them to genteel pauperism. I am a plain-spoken woman."

"That you are, Aunt Jane; I'll give you credit for speaking out your mind in intelligible English, whoever else does not. And you are great on the woman question, I know. Spinsters generally are, I believe. The 'Women's Rights' women are nearly always the men's *lefts*."

"Don't be impertinent. I am not going to argue the point with a young scapegrace like you. My grand idea, though, of 'Women's Rights' is, that every woman, gentle or simple, should be so brought up by her natural protectors that she may, if needful, employ head or hands, or both, in getting her own living, according to the station of life in which it has pleased God to place her, or rather to *call*

her : for it is by no means patent that a woman's station should be that of her parents, particularly if the parents have been improvident."

"You would not have my sisters get their own living, I suppose?"

"Why not?"

"They are Carisbrokes."

"And Carisbrokes must eat and drink, and wear decent clothes, to say nothing of a roof to shelter them, whether they be male or female. The Carisbrokes have been fools, and it is about time they came to their senses, and learned to look ahead. When your father dies, his income dies with him, as far as his family is concerned. Your poor mother's five hundred a-year—which, by the way, *you* are doing your best to diminish—will not be much among six girls—I put *you* out of the question, you see!—six girls, brought up in habits of luxury and unthrift, and with no idea of helping themselves or each other. Which would disgrace them the more—honest, honourable women's work—or—genteel poverty and dependency? I have thought much lately on these subjects."

"So it appears; and I don't say that there is not sense in what you put forth. But we can talk about the girls another day; I am sure I shall always be willing to do the very best I can for my sisters. What I want now is to get on terms again with my father. He is in ever such a huff."

"I'll do what I can; I'll speak to your father, but I am afraid it will be to very little purpose. The Carisbrokes never would put up with interference, and I have certainly no right to come between my brother and his son."

CHAPTER IV.

MELIORA.

"He that complies against his will
Is of his own opinion still."

MISS MARTIN, the governess, arrived that evening, according to arrangement. When she wrote to say that she might be expected back at a certain time, the Perrywood household knew that on the specified day, and at the precise hour mentioned, Miss Martin would, without fail, put in an appearance. Nothing short of "the visitation of God," in the shape of direst malady, or awful accident, could possibly intervene with the execution of Miss Martin's purposes, especially with the fulfilment of any promise to which she had pledged herself. Her Christmas vacation was not quite ended, but she had received a private communication from Aunt Jane that her speedy return to the scene of her duties would be esteemed a favour.

The married sister with whom she was spending her holiday was inclined to grumble. Why should she shorten her furlough for the sake of people who only regarded her as a hireling, and who were certainly capable of managing their own matters without her help?

"I am not so certain that they can manage without further assistance," replied Miss Martin; "and as the Carisbrokes have been tolerably kind to me, I feel bound to come to the rescue, at their call."

"At whose call? They don't unanimously implore your intervention, I suppose?"

"It is Miss Carisbroke—Aunt Jane—who writes; but I am pretty sure she has written at the request of her brother, my patron. I expect to find rather a curious sort of administration at the Rectory. Aunt Jane and Lavinia are evidently at feud; Maggie carries on the guerilla warfare which seems to be essential to her existence; the twins are doubtless degenerating into absolute dormice, and Joan is always in a pickle, you know. I can

imagine the anarchy and discord that already prevail in that ill-regulated family."

"And will you be able to remedy either?"

"I cannot say; I may be able to do something. I thought—I hoped I was getting in the thin end of the wedge before I left them. I was just on the point of inaugurating several petty reforms, with a view to clearing the way for more important advances; but, of course, the death of Mrs. Carisbroke makes a great deal of difference. With Miss Carisbroke—I mean Lavinia—at the head of affairs, I foresee—*complications!*"

"You always got on very well with Mrs. Carisbroke, did you not?"

"Yes, I 'got on,' as people say. She was not at all difficult to deal with, provided no demands were made on her personal convenience. She let every one do pretty much as they chose; she only asked to be treated with proper respect as lady of the house, and let alone. She would have been quite happy in a Zenana, had she been born a Mohammedan. I don't suppose, Claudia, you ever met with a person so innately, obstinately apathetic."

"Yet she and her husband were happy together, were they not?"

"In a certain sense, they were 'happy,' I suppose. At any rate, they were not, as married people, unhappy. He was always kind to her—that is, he very seldom snubbed her, and invariably called her 'my dear'; he never contradicted her, and he never made a fuss with her. He certainly cared very little for her society; but I cannot wonder at that—she had literally no powers of conversation; I should think they must have exhausted every possible subject of discourse before their honeymoon was over. They never had much to say to each other; still they said it civilly, though occasionally the wife complained that he shut himself up from her."

"And did he?"

"He shut himself from the world at large, to an extent that displeased his parishioners, who sometimes ask the use of a rector who lives like a *dilettante* hermit, with his library door locked against common humanity."

"Is he a great scholar?"

"I should say not; only he has the reputation of being one. He has come to me several times for authorities; he likes good books in the best editions; whenever he buys a picture it is a gem, and generally a bargain. His tastes are notoriously æsthetic, and everything about him is *de luxe*. He is kindly-natured, I am sure, but selfish. Lately he has been rather unamiable, and the girls have grumbled at papa's cross words and looks. I am almost sure—of course I would not say it to any one but you, Claudia—that he is a good deal perplexed with money matters."

"I thought the Carisbrokes were rather wealthy, or at least in very easy circumstances?"

"They have a very tolerable income, undoubtedly, but they live expensively. And then, I fancy, I am sure, that Mr. Frank, the only son, has been giving his father a good deal of anxiety. Indeed, his poor mother said as much a few weeks ago; she excused 'her Franky,' on the ground that young men will be young men, and that he was only following the example of his elders. And she lamented that his father should think it necessary to evince so much displeasure and treat him as a delinquent. It would 'all come right,' she said; Frank would be as steady as old Time when once he was ordained; and really, he had no vicious habits, his only fault was having expensive tastes; and he was naturally generous and open-handed, and so, as a matter of course, exceeded his allowance. I felt it my duty to remark that it was a very serious fault to exceed, systematically, one's income; that no person could be said to be *generous* who left his or her debts unpaid."

"How did she take it?"

"She did not 'take it' at all. She assented, of course, to the proposition that going into debt is blameworthy, but she was evidently quite incapable of applying the axiom to the case in point. I am afraid Mr. Frank has outrun the constable to a considerable account, and I should say ready money is not a drug with Mr. Carisbroke. He must be living to the full extent of his income; I won't say—I have no right to say—beyond it."

"And what sort of young man is this Mr. Frank?"

"He would be rather a nice young fellow if he were not so dismally selfish, and if he had any principle. He treats his sisters as inferior beings, and is fond of holding forth on the littlenesses and weaknesses of women; his one idea is, evidently, to make himself, under any circumstances, as comfortable as possible, and to gratify, on the spur of the moment, his luxurious æsthetic tastes."

"I am rather sorry for these Carisbrokes, for they are almost certain, as a family, to come to grief. Just now, however, I can only feel inclined to quarrel with them because they are taking you away from me earlier than I expected."

"I am extremely sorry, but I think it my duty to go. I am leaving peace, and affection, and fellow-feeling behind me, I know, to enter upon a life of difficulty and confusion, perhaps of annoyance. But though I shall accord Lavinia all respect as lady of the house, I shall not permit her to usurp authority over myself or my pupils. Should we clash, should she refuse to listen to reason, I shall appeal to Mr. Carisbroke, even if I have to bombard those double library-doors."

"And how about the nursery?"

"With that I can have no concern. Aunt Jane undertakes that, I understand. Poor little baby, it has come into a very cold, unkindly world! everybody seems to resent its advent; and Mr. Carisbroke has even refused to see it."

"Refused to see his own child! He must be an insufferable sort of person! I almost hope, Meliora, you will not stay on at Perrywood Rectory; I am quite sure you are much too good for its inmates. Such people as they are cannot possibly appreciate your line of action, and they are certain to misinterpret your purest motives."

"Never mind, so long as the motives *are* pure and the action beneficent. Do you know, I rather enjoy the idea of an undertaking that will require all my judgment, tax all my powers, and call out my utmost energy?"

"I know that you are naturally combative, and like nothing better than strategic warfare; but I do not quite see what you purpose to effect with these young people."

"To *rouse* them; to wake them up; to make them work; to teach them an aimless life is unworthy of

an immortal creature! To show them, if possible, how enervating are habits of selfishness and luxury, how despicable is indolence, how ruinous, in any station of life, a reckless, thoughtless, uncalculating expenditure!"

"If you can do all this, *Meliora*, you will indeed do much; but I doubt whether the seeds you so painstakingly sow will ever germinate in so unkindly soil. And they will not thank you for your good offices, any more than the bears in the Zoo thank their keepers for poking them up when they are inclined to be drowsy."

"Yes! I know it is thankless work enough; it has been from the beginning, and your simile of the bears is not a bad one, for it is really 'poking-up' and *shaking-up* that the twins require. No gentler measures will suffice. First of all, there is getting them out of bed in the morning. I don't believe, if left to themselves, they would get up in time for dinner; then there is urging them to dress with something like expedition, and to make a satisfactory *toilette*; and they dislike water as much as any cat. Then they dawdle through their breakfast, which consists of all sorts of improper food—such as spiced-beef, buttered-eggs, sausages, and strong coffee—then they must be absolutely hunted into the schoolroom, and driven to their work. The hour comes for the daily walk—you know my idea of a constitutional!—four or five miles at least, in *every* kind of weather—except thunderstorms, and deep snows, and avalanches of rain. I *cannot* get them along; they persist in droning on at the rate of a mile an hour; and rather than quicken their pace they will actually sit down on the ground and cry! Generally speaking, they contrive to evade the walk; they have bad colds, sore throats, tooth-ache, sprained ankles—anything which may serve as an excuse for staying indoors, dozing or gossiping over the fire! And so on, through the day, till night, when they insist on a hearty supper, and sitting up till their elders retire."

"Well, my dear, you are welcome to your task. Do not be too much disappointed if these comatose young ladies prove to be quite impracticable. And—may I say what I think, *Meliora*?"

Now, to avoid the lengthy conversation which ensued,

I will just give a slight sketch of Meliora Martin as she really was.

She was about thirty-eight years of age, and would have been handsome, but for the severe expression of her truly fine and classic features. She was scarcely above the middle height, but she held herself so upright, and carried herself with so much *aplomb*, that she gave one the idea of being several inches taller than she was. Her dress, simple and good, was always what a gentlewoman's dress should be—not servilely following any freak of fashion, nor yet arranged without due regard to the prevailing mode. I need not say that she was scrupulously neat, and regarded cleanliness as inseparable from godliness.

She was one of four daughters, two of whom were married and one dead. She was possessed of a small, independent fortune, quite sufficient for all her modest needs, but she had no idea of living a life of respectable inaction, and she had an innate passion for teaching, or rather *educating*, her own sex. When her last parent died, and family affairs were settled, she announced her determination to devote herself to the life of a governess, and with the intention of training herself for the momentous task, she took a responsible situation in a large first-class ladies' school, willing to undergo any drudgery, and a certain amount of servitude, in order to obtain the necessary experience, and to be able to form correct theories of her own as to the very best methods not only of imparting knowledge, but of the discipline requisite to the formation of sterling excellence of feminine character. One whole year she passed at Kensington; then, having gained what she wanted, she transferred her services first to a Parisian, and then to a Hanoverian school, and finally returned to England, feeling herself fully capable of the task to which she meant to devote her talents, her energies, and her whole existence.

She was barely twenty-five when she returned from Hanover, after a short tour in Italy, and for twelve years she laboured assiduously at what she held to be her "mission in this life." Having lately completed the education of two heiresses, she looked about her for such a situation as

she desired; and though she had the choice of at least four most tempting engagements, she declined them all in favour of the family at Perrywood Rectory—"simply because *there* was real work for her to do." A hundred a year was the stipend she demanded—she might have had a hundred and fifty, if she had pleased—it was due to herself and to her profession, she averred, to place a sufficient price on her services; besides, people never really valued what they obtained cheaply.

Mr. Carisbroke grumbled, hesitated, wavered, and finally consented. It had broken upon his mind of late—for he had a mind, though his wife had not—that his girls were growing up in a state of deplorable neglect and ignorance, and he, knowing his own affairs better than any one else, said one day to himself, "If I die, there will be very little for these girls! What will become of them? I foresee that Frank will swallow up pretty nearly all that remains of his mother's fortune, and it is very hard for young women of good family to be thrown upon the world. It is only right, only fair, that a few hundreds should be spent on their education. From all I hear of this Miss Martin, she is the very person to teach them thoroughly, and to place them—some of them, at least—in a position to help themselves should self-help become a sheer necessity. They have had no training, poor children! and what they have learned has been of the shallowest. Their mother has never——well; I won't find fault with *her*, I have been so much to blame myself, and I knew exactly what she was when I married her. It is too late, I am afraid, to do anything with the two elder girls, but surely something may be brought to pass with the twins, and with little Joan. It will be tough work, though, to get Netta and Brenda into harness, for they are more lymphatic even than their mother, and quite as mulish. What a mistake it is to imagine that a silly, dull little woman is easier to manage than one more intellectual and cultured. You can't convince an animated *doll*! You can't reason with a simpleton, even if she be good-tempered—which simpletons very rarely are! They are invariably obstinate, mulish, indeed; going their own way, not, perhaps, from actual perversity, but from pure love of their own dear

selves! Let no man marry an ignorant, weak-minded little woman and fancy that he is going to hold the reins! And money is not everything; it makes to itself wings and flies away, leaving behind only the empty—very empty—coffers. A man when he marries should think, too, of his possible offspring; if he will not marry wisely for his own sake, he ought not to give his children a mother incapable of training them wisely and well. Ah! we don't think of these things till it is useless to repent, and too late to make any but the most trivial reform.

“After all, I am not sure but that Louisa is good enough for *me*! Perhaps, if I look at my own life we are more equally matched than I at first supposed. I have had no companion in my wife—did I deserve one? Has not our commonplace, Darby and Joan life been quite enough for me? Is she not really better than I, inasmuch as she never perceived her duties, while I, seeing them all too clearly, put them aside, rather than let them interfere with the even tenor of my way? No! I won't blame Louisa; I'll blame myself. If I had set myself vigorously to work, two-and-twenty years ago, when my wife and I first came home to Perrywood,—wife, children, and parish might have been far otherwise than they are to-day. It is too late for me—for her; but it's not too late for the girls, and all I can do now is to engage a governess who will do her best to make them useful and estimable women; and invest her with as much authority as ‘Mamma’ will permit.”

So it came to pass that Miss Martin was engaged as governess to the Misses Carisbroke, of Perrywood Rectory; and she entered upon her duties with an earnest desire to fulfil them to the very best of her ability, and in God's sight. She prepared herself for many a rebuff, and for a good deal of opposition; but at least she would remain where she was for one twelvemonth; then, if she did not see that her system had begun to work, her endeavours to bear fruit, she would seek another sphere of action.

She had, during her first week's residence at the Rectory, a private conversation with the Rector, in which he expounded himself, as freely as he dared, and invested

the governess with plenary powers in the schoolroom, and out of it, as far as his three younger daughters were concerned. But of this "private conversation" Mrs. Carisbroke knew nothing; her husband arranged that it should take place when she was doing her shopping, with Lavinia and Margaret, at Cotswoldbury. She had, I suppose, reasonable confidence in her husband, but a woman of her type, narrow, captious, exacting, and pertinacious, is always of necessity *jealous*; it is a part of her small, self-centred nature, and she can no more help it than she can help breathing loudly while she sleeps. If Mrs. Carisbroke had guessed during her drive that her husband and another woman than herself were shut up together in that *sanctum sanctorum*, the library, she would have felt mightily impelled to order the horses' heads to be turned on the instant, and forego the shopping.

Even when he and Aunt Jane sometimes retired for a little confabulation, she would be sure to pop in, on some pretext or other, or perhaps on none, and break the thread of whatever conversation was going on. So it followed naturally, that Mr. Carisbroke took good care to keep his wife in blissful ignorance whenever he wanted to have a few words with any lady-friend, whether it were his sister Jane or the village schoolmistress; and who shall blame him? A woman makes trouble for herself, when she grows stinging-nettles instead of heartsease in the garden of married life, which ought to be a paradise, but is too often a wilderness of noxious weeds.

I need not say that Mr. Carisbroke behaved with all gentlemanly decorum to "*Meliora*," and they had a good deal to say to each other. At the conclusion of the interview he opened the door for her, and bowed her into the hall, like a man of breeding as he was; and it was tacitly understood that nothing was to be said to Mrs. Carisbroke.

This was after the summer vacation, on a beautiful August afternoon, and Miss Martin thenceforth pursued her arduous task, with hope, courage, energy, and, above all, with indomitable patience. The mother of her pupils was too often "a thorn in the flesh," for she could not but sympathise with an indolence, an apathy which was

scarcely an exaggeration of her own. Lavinia and Maggie inherited much of the pettiness of their mother's character, but they had their small ambitions, together with a vague distrust of their own attainments. Netta and Brenda were their mother's own children, and as they always appealed to her whenever distressed by their governess, they were continually shielded, and encouraged in their lazy, self-indulgent habits.

Meliora could, of course, have appealed to "papa," but her judgment told her that this was better avoided. She had not been a week in the house when she had completely gauged the characters of those with whom she was now associated, had taken in the shallowness of the mistress; had fathomed the depths—if depths they could be called—of the master's mind; and knew pretty accurately what were the materials ready to hand, with which she must commence her herculean labours. She might have run a tilt every day with "mamma," if she had been so disposed, but she knew better than embroil herself with the mother of her pupils. So consummate was her tact, so perfect her self-control, that when Christmas approached, she was entreated to remain at Perrywood,—and that by Mrs. Carisbroke herself. But she had promised a visit to her sister, Mrs. May, and she was not feeling quite so well as usual; so she departed for Hampstead Heath a little before Christmas, to the disappointment of both Mr. and Mrs. Carisbroke, and to the sincere regret of Joan, who had come to the conclusion that Miss Martin was "not at all a bad sort, if one *tried* to do one's duty!"

"Any way," said Joan, disconsolately, as the governess drove away, "she never *snubs* you because she feels nasty herself, though she is hard upon you, if she thinks you deserve it." Joan had a keen sense of justice, and could appreciate it, even when it took the form of punishment.

Little did Meliora think that she and Mrs. Carisbroke were bidding each other a final farewell. There was no anxiety for the mother, who had come so happily through her troubles on many previous occasions, and no one at all anticipated the catastrophe which ensued. And the governess went back to her post, more resolved than ever

to "make women" of her unpromising charges, and to reform the whole household, Mr. Carisbroke included!

Of course, the death of Mrs. Carisbroke made all the difference to Meliora; it left her free scope for her work, and a fair field for the prosecution of her labours. For she determined not to be impeded by the obstacles which Lavinia and Maggie might think proper to oppose to her cherished projects; and in Aunt Jane she knew she would find an ally rather than an enemy.

CHAPTER V.

"POOR LITTLE RUBY."

"Who gave you this name?"

"My godfathers and godmothers in my baptism," &c.

CHURCH CATECHISM.

"MISS MARTIN," began Lavinia at the tea-table, with an authoritative air, that had grown upon her wonderfully since New Year's Day, "I do hope now you are come back you will keep those troublesome children in order! I can do nothing while they are allowed to roam all over the house, and come into the drawing-room at will. Netta and Brenda seem always half asleep; and Joan is always in mischief, and pert and saucy to the last degree."

"I am sorry that Joan forgets herself! I thought her so much improved before Christmas, and she made so many promises when I went away. She does look wild, I must confess; and her skirts! My dear Lavinia, they *must* be lengthened."

"I prefer to see children in short dresses;" and Lavinia stiffened her milk-white neck, and drooped her full eyelids after a fashion she had lately adopted, as being both distinguished and commanding. "Have you quite finished, Miss Martin?"

"No, my dear; I will take another cup of tea, if you have one in the pot, and I will trouble Maggie for another slice of ham. I dined early on sandwiches; consequently I have an unusual appetite."

Lavinia immediately poured about a pint and a half of lukewarm water into the tea-pot, which, as Miss Martin knew, was not really exhausted. Maggie cut a huge piece of ham, broad, and thick, and fat, full five times as much as Meliora had previously consumed. She noted both actions, and quite understood the amiable spirit which prompted them; but she made no remonstrance. She simply cut off a small, thin slice of ham, and returned the rest to the dish with a smile and a nod, that had in them just a gleam of satire and amusement. And when a brimming cup of pale, clouded tea was handed to her, she deliberately emptied it into the slop-basin, saying quietly, "Excuse me, dear Lavinia, you have drowned this tea, and it is just water bewitched. Never mind! there is plenty of milk; it will do quite as well—better, indeed, for, as you know, I am not much of a tea-drinker, only, being so very tired, I thought I would indulge for once in a pick-me-up!"

And Meliora carefully rinsed her tea-cup, and refilled it from the milk-jug, still half full of good genuine, creamy milk, such as she had not tasted since her departure from Perrywood. "Ah! this is quite a treat," she said, as she set down her cup. "I really thank you, Lavinia, for your mistake in deluging the tea-leaves. This is fifty times nicer, and a hundred times better, than the very best cup of *Souchong*, or *Orange Pekoe*! And, Maggie, I must give you a few lessons in carving! *Chunks* of meat are alike wasteful, unpleasant, and vulgar. Good carving is really an accomplishment."

"I can carve as well as anybody, when I please," retorted Maggie. "I want no lessons. You said you were hungry, you know."

"Ah, well," said Meliora, laughing, as if she quite enjoyed the joke; "there are appetites and appetites. And I suppose you measured mine by your own. But I am sorry, because you have quite destroyed the good looks of the ham. No, my dear; not any more, thank you, or I

shall not be able to take my usual supper of rice-milk. But about Joan's skirts?"

"What about them, Miss Martin?"

"They must be lengthened immediately. It is a foolish and injurious fashion for young children—these short petticoats, like overgrown flounces; but for a girl of Joan's age and stature, it is simply indecent. I cannot allow her to leave the house in that dress."

"That is my province," replied Miss Carisbroke, turning red with anger. "I am responsible for the dresses of my younger sisters, and I know what is proper for girls in the schoolroom."

"You cannot have had much experience of young girls, my dear," answered the governess suavely, and with perfect temper; at the same time in a tone that Lavinia too well comprehended—a tone that meant *conquest*! She hated contention because it gave her trouble, but at the same time she was *mulish*, as small, self-centred natures constitutionally are. She persisted in her own way simply because it was her own way, as her mother had done before her; and she resolved in her mind not to cede the point if possible, although Joan's unfortunate legs were a positive eye-sore to her, whenever she cast her eyes upon them. "Have you any black merino in the house?"

"Whatever there is, it cannot be used for Joan," said Lavinia, haughtily. "Come, Maggie, if you have finished, we may as well practise those new duets." And with a sweep of her own trailing flounces, that she thought extremely imposing, Miss Carisbroke, without another glance at the governess, left the room.

Meliora smiled when she was left alone. "So, so!" she said, tapping the marble mantelpiece lightly with her forefinger—a habit of hers when she was coming to an important decision—"the contest begins at once! the gauntlet is thrown down without much delay. Well! so much the better, perhaps; I don't want to interfere with Miss Lavinia's prerogatives as eldest daughter of this house, but my pupils are my own affair. I think I made Mr. Carisbroke understand that if I undertook these girls of his, it was to educate them completely, not merely to cram them with languages and ologies, and teach them to

play the piano—which, by the way, not one of them ever will, except Joan, and I think those long splay fingers of hers may do some execution presently. And dress is certainly a matter of importance in a girl's education. A woman's dress should be at once economical, tasteful, appropriate, and modest. Now Joan's short frock may be economical in one sense, though not in another; tasteful it is not, appropriate it is not, and I think I am not going too far when I say it is not *modest*. Furthermore, it is injurious to health. The child will get chronic rheumatism. I must attend to this matter without loss of time."

And then Miss Martin ascended to the schoolroom, where she found two of her pupils, the twins, each with a paper-covered novel in her hand, crouching over an enormous fire, and audibly crunching "almond-rock."

"You will spoil your complexions, and, what is worse, injure your health, if you persist in roasting your faces, children," said Meliora, beginning to take off some of the coals. She was interrupted by a piteous entreaty: "Oh, please don't! never mind our complexions. We were so cold!" from both the girls.

"The room is like a kitchen when the dinner is being cooked," replied Meliora, still removing the superfluous fuel and then sweeping up the hearth with her accustomed prompt activity.

"Oh, we were *so* comfortable!" cried Brenda.

"Yes, we were so very comfortable!" echoed Netta.

"We have been comfortable all the holidays," simultaneously affirmed the pair.

"I have no doubt, my dears," was the reply; "but some people have strange notions of comfort, and, in order to be what they call 'comfortable,' sacrifice their entire future to a transient present." Meliora forgot for the moment that she was talking to the twins—her final remark was far too deep for their impervious minds. They looked vacantly, and curled themselves up again on the hearthrug; she thought she would not inaugurate her reign with too much severity, so she let them read on, simply saying that in half-an-hour they must prepare for bed: and then she asked for Joan.

"Joan is in the nursery," said Brenda.

"In the nursery," added Netta; "she is always there now. She will have to turn over a new leaf now you are come back, and learn her lessons again."

"And so must you turn over a new leaf. I shall lock up all those novels."

"You can't!" exclaimed Netta. "They are Frank's."

"They are Frank's," echoed Brenda.

"Then I must request Mr. Frank to keep them out of your reach. I am going to the nursery, now, and I shall leave the door open to cool the air. It is not at all a cold night, and the thermometer must be quite up to 70° here. Where is the thermometer?"

"It is broken," cried they both, with a great show of elation. The fact being they had broken it of *malice prepense*, because Meliora never would permit a temperature much above 60°. Their governess, catching a glance of intelligence exchanged between them, gave a shrewd guess as to the manner of the thermometer's destruction; but she made no remark, and the moment the sound of her footsteps died away along the passage, Netta jumped up and shut the schoolroom door, while Brenda exerted herself to replace the coals which had been laid beneath the grate. "Nasty thing," said one sister. "Nasty old frump!" said the other. "I knew we should not have a bit more comfort when *she* came back," continued Brenda; "but we will do as we like to-night; she won't punish us just yet, and she won't dare to complain to papa, for *he* is not to be troubled, you know, and Vinny and Maggie will take our sides."

"Yes; Vinny and Maggie will take our sides, and we will do as we like to-night," took up the echo. Meliora sometimes wondered whether, being twins, the brains intended for one human creature had been made to do duty for them both. The Siamese Twins themselves could scarcely have been more unanimous in speech, idea, and action. In the meantime she reached the nursery, and found Joan sitting on a rocking-chair, softly singing lullaby to the baby. Her long black stockings were conspicuous.

"Well, Joan, my dear, have you turned nursemaid?" Miss Martin asked, kindly.

"Yes; and I like it so much," answered Joan quite excitedly. "It is so nice to have a *live* doll! Hush, then, darling! Hush-a-by, little treasure! I am sure she knows me already, Miss Martin! Now, *isn't* she pretty?"

Miss Martin knelt down on the hearthrug, the better to inspect the small specimen on Joan's lap. Joan waited the governess's dictum with much anxiety. Nurse Barnard called it "a very shabby baby—the shabbiest she had ever nursed;" the elder sisters said plainly it was "a fright;" and Frank thought it would be "a great mercy if it were taken!"

"Joan," said Meliora, smiling, "you are like the mother who thought all her goslings were little swans! But I don't know"—as the baby suddenly opened a pair of very fine dark eyes, and stared as babies can—"I am not sure but that you are right, or, rather, will be right, if the tiny thing should live. It will be a case of the ugly duckling, Joan. No; I cannot honestly say she is a pretty BABY: but she may grow up into a handsome woman. Her eyes are splendid, and see what beautiful long lashes she has! Her features, too, I *think*, are good. She is a trifle yellow, certainly; miserably thin—all skin and bone; but that may be amended. If she live, she will be the beauty of the family, probably."

"I said so, and I knew it," said Joan, ecstatically. "I am so glad you are of my opinion. I suppose she is *not* pretty now, except to me; I have got to love her so much, and she is quieter with me than with anybody else. I had an old doll once, Miss Martin—indeed, I have her now, hidden away, because Maggie means to burn her some day, she says—such a poor old battered thing, like a mulatto that has had the small-pox badly, and lost all her hair in a fever! She was my first real doll, I think, and I am afraid I treated her rather roughly; but when I had a grand new one given me on my birthday, I could not care for it as I did for Felicia—that was her name, you know! Nor was any doll—and first and last I had a good many—ever so lovely to me as my first waxen darling. Felicia was like my child—the others were only dolls! I carried them about in public, but I took Felicia into my bed every night, and cuddled her up, and kissed her poor, pale,

scratched cheeks, and put a nightcap on her bald head, and tried to make believe that she *felt* comfortable. They would not let me bring her out of the nursery, because she was so ugly and shabby; and they used to scold me because I would not love the pink-cheeked, flaxen-haired, finely dressed young ladies that from time to time were given me; but I *could* not care for them, you know; and as long as I played with dolls, Felicia was sweeter to me than any other. And this is my first living doll; I shall never see a baby, to my mind, prettier than this! Only poor Felicia naturally got uglier, and, I am afraid, dirtier; and my little darling here will grow bonnier and sweeter every day! You won't order me out of the nursery, will you, Miss Martin?"

"Certainly not, Joan. I think it will be good for you to love the baby. Only you must not neglect your duties; your lessons must be learned, and your exercises written, you know. It may be that God means you to be a little mother to the child; but your own education must not be slighted for her—indeed, she is rather an additional cause why you should exert yourself to learn all you can, and be as good as you can, that you may be fit to teach and train her as she grows older. You will have to try and overcome all your bad habits on her account. You would not, I am sure, dear Joan, set this little one a bad example."

"Indeed, I would not. Oh, thank you, Miss Martin, for speaking so kindly; and I *will* try to be very good and learn my lessons and practise with all my heart. And I have asked God to make me good, and to make me wise, too, for *her* sake, poor little pet, for nobody but me wants her. If she died to-night, they would be glad, and say it was a good thing. And papa has not seen her yet. He must to-morrow."

"Why to-morrow?"

"She is to be christened, you know, and I am to give her her name, the little precious! I cannot be her god-mother, because I am not confirmed."

"I do not see that that need hinder it."

"Oh, do you not? Papa seemed to say that was conclusive."

"Who are spoken of for sponsors?"

"Aunt Jane for one. She is my godmother, you know, and she has always been very good and kind to me. And they thought—they hoped *you* would not object to be the other, Miss Martin."

"I am afraid I do object. I have peculiar notions for what you call a 'Churchwoman.' It is 'only a form,' people tell me; but I don't believe in mere forms. It must be, as far as I am concerned, the real thing in all its fulness, or—nothing at all."

"I see. But why can't it be 'the real thing in all its fulness'?"

"Because, my dear, in years to come this poor little mite would, in all probability, have to take the will for the deed; and that would be bad for *her*. I am only '*the governess*.' And I have been governess long enough to find out that the relationship extends so far, and no farther, even under the most favourable circumstances. I could not hope to remain at Perrywood Rectory till the baby here began to grow up."

"Why not? Papa thinks all the world of you. You should have heard how he lectured me the other day about obeying you in spirit as well as in letter. He thinks you are a governess in a thousand."

"He is very kind," said Meliora; and then she came to a full stop, thinking of all sorts of events that might happen within the next year or two—among them, Mr. Carisbroke's second marriage. But this she could not, of course, mention to his young daughter. She could not rely upon her continued residence at the Rectory, therefore she would not be sponsor to the little nameless creature before her. Meliora hated shams, and all things that were said to be "a mere figure of speech." And in her heart of hearts, though a member of the Church of England (so-called), she did not believe in sponsorship. If there must be a second godmother—and what rubbish it all seemed!—Joan was certainly the person on whom the actual duty devolved. She answered nothing, however, only saying that she must speak to Mr. Carisbroke. And then, as Joan rose to lay the baby in her *berceau*nette, she noticed once more the girl's glaringly curtailed and scanty skirts.

"My dear Joan, is not your dress uncomfortably short?"

"It is scandalously short!" responded Joan, the colour burning in her face. "I am ashamed for Frank and the servants to see me, for I am *not* a little girl, though Lavinia will call me one. I don't want to be grown-up; I don't want to get out of the schoolroom; but I do want a proper dress. Why, what do you think cook had the impertinence to say yesterday?"

"Indeed, I am not likely to guess, Joan."

"She looked up at me as she was cleaning the hall, and said, 'La, Miss Joan, you'd pass for a columbine if your skirts was only pink and spangled instead of black!' I don't quite know what a '*columbine*' is, except it is a flower in a garden; but I am pretty sure cook meant something uncivil."

"A columbine is a girl who dances on the stage at pantomimes. I dare say cook did not intend to be rude. Do not be ready to take offence, my dear; and be comforted, your skirts shall be made of a decent length."

"Oh! thank you; what a blessing! And I shall be so much warmer, too. I was thinking that if it froze again I must petition for gaiters. But I don't want *long* dresses."

"Of course not. You shall have them of a suitable length for your age—down to your ankles."

"But will Lavinia allow it? She will be awfully angry, I guess."

"I think it can be managed, and Lavinia will be pleased when she sees how much more comfortable you are."

And Miss Martin went away, leaving her pupil in quite a jubilant frame of mind. She was not to be shut up in the schoolroom, away from the precious baby; and the grievance of her skirts was to be remedied. And well she knew that what *Meliora* took in hand she would speedily carry out.

The governess was just debating whether she had better not seek an interview at once with Mr. Carisbroke when a message came from that gentleman: "Master's compliments, and would Miss Martin be so very good as to step into the library?"

"Pray excuse my sending for you, Miss Martin," were the Rector's first words. "I wanted to speak to you privately, and when I looked into the dining-room you were gone, and I heard the girls hammering away at '*Puritani*' in the drawing-room. There have been melancholy changes since you were last here!"

And then followed a conversation, such as naturally might have been expected, under the circumstances. Mr. Carisbroke ended by saying, "So now, if you will look after the younger girls generally, Miss Martin, I shall be extremely obliged. The twins want rousing, and Joan, poor child, wants—I hardly know what! She has been a very good girl, especially to that unfortunate baby; but she is so awkward—so——"

"The first thing to be done is to dress her properly," interrupted Miss Martin, perceiving that the Rector halted for want of the right expression. "There has been some mistake with Joan's mourning."

"Ah! you think so?" he answered, visibly relieved. "I felt there was something wrong myself, and I told Lavinia that Joan's dress was not quite the thing. But she insisted that it was! and I did not feel in the mood for contention, so I decided to leave the matter to you, to place it in your hands as soon as you returned. You will do just as you please in everything concerning your pupils. I shall tell my elder daughters that you have full authority over the children."

"Thank you, Mr. Carisbroke; that will greatly facilitate my task. The power you give me I shall not hesitate to use, as regards Netta, Brenda, and Joan. You do not object to Joan's devotion to her little sister, I think?"

"By no means, if you do not. She must not spend too much time in the nursery, of course; that would be to her own injury."

"Precisely, in every way; her health might suffer, and her studies would be interfered with. But a reasonable interest in the baby will certainly tend greatly to her improvement. She is steadier and gentler already; the helpless dependence of her tiny sister has awakened in her a sense of responsibility which can scarcely fail to

produce the happiest results. The child is to be christened to-morrow, Joan tells me."

"Oh, yes; and that reminds me. Has anybody asked you if you will be so very good as 'to stand'?"

"Joan has asked me, Mr. Carisbroke, and I have, in all kindness, declined the obligation."

"It is only a form, you know."

"Then why not omit it altogether?"

"Well, I can hardly do that, you see. As a clergyman, I am bound to attend to the spiritual needs of my own household, and sponsors being part and parcel of the Church's machinery, I am hardly justified in dispensing with them in the present case. You would not be troubled in any way, you understand; we should never expect you to look after the spiritual interests of the poor little thing, even if she should live, which does not seem at all probable."

"I think she *will* live, Mr. Carisbroke. I have seen her, and I agree with Joan, that if well nursed and looked after, she will turn out a very fine little girl. You have not yet looked at the poor child, I am told."

"I am ashamed to say I have not. I *could not*, in fact. She has cost me very dear. If she had not come into the world, I should not have been left alone with all these girls on my hands. Daughters need a mother, Miss Martin."

Miss Martin quietly assented, thinking, at the same time, that Mrs. Carisbroke was so inefficient a mother that she would not be greatly missed on that head. The truth was that the Rector, like many another bereaved man, invested his lost one with all sorts of virtues which she never possessed, and every difficulty that occurred, or was likely to occur, he at once ascribed to his widowed condition. Even Frank's unsatisfactory conduct seemed to him just then to be, in some sort, the result of his poor mother's death! It was wonderful how desolate the Rector really did feel, and how much he missed the companion of the last two-and-twenty years, considering the very little communion there had been between them.

But a man must be heartless indeed who does *not* miss the mother of his children, suddenly taken from her place, even though their married life has been most dull

and prosaic, and in the highest sense—incomplete. The Rector had not been a very loving husband ; he had gone his way, and left "poor Louisa" to go hers ; he had never opened his heart to her, and she would not have appreciated it if he had. Their children were, to a great extent, a strong bond of union between them, and there was the habitude of their relations as man and wife, as must be the case after long years of even the most unsentimental association ; somehow, there *was* a void in Mr. Carisbroke's heart which he had never known before, and which sometimes surprised him as he remembered how very little "poor Louisa" had had to do with the real joys and sorrows of his existence. And as he spoke, he sighed, and thought pensively of the days that were gone.

"Then you refuse to accept office?" he resumed, presently.

"I must refuse," replied Meliora ; "my conscience will not let me incur responsibilities which it may be difficult, if not impossible, to discharge. If there must be a second godmother, let Joan '*stand!*' Though she is not confirmed, she is very far in advance of some who are, and it seems to me that she really is the best person to undertake the charge. It is irregular, of course, but not uncanonical, I believe?"

"I don't know—I never gave it a thought. There is not, as far as I am aware, any law, ecclesiastical or otherwise, which forbids an unconfirmed person to officiate as sponsor. It may be irregular, but there is no one to interfere ; and, of course, Joan *will be* confirmed when the bishop comes next summer. And, as you say, it seems to be in the fitness of things, especially as you decline. Jane, too, thought the rule might be waived in this instance ; she is very much struck with Joan's devotion to the little one."

And so it was settled that Joan should be godmother to the baby, to the immense indignation of her elder sisters, who thought papa must be really going out of his senses ! And if Joan were made so much of by him and Aunt Jane and Miss Martin—not to speak of Frank, who vowed "Old Jo' should not be sat upon while he was to the fore"—the result would certainly be that she would become pertier than ever, and altogether unendurable.

Next day the baby received the name chosen for her by her young godmother, and one of the churchwardens represented the Rector's only and absent brother, who, being on the other side of the world, was quite unconscious of the advent of his niece and godchild. It was, of course, the very quietest of christenings; they all walked into church together, and at the font little Ruby and her father had their first meeting. The curate, Mr. Selwyn, performed the ceremony of baptism; the godfather and godmothers promised and vowed all sorts of things in the name of the infant; and the godmothers, both of them, were undoubtedly in earnest, and meant to do their very best for poor little Ruby.

Joan, to the astonishment of her sisters, appeared in a long dress; and it presently transpired that Meliora had lent her one of her own skirts, and fitted it on her pupil for the occasion, so that she escaped the mortification of standing at the font in the character of a black Columbine. Frank declared he had no idea "Old Jo' could cut so respectable a figure, and he shouldn't wonder if she turned out the clever woman of the family."

The christening over, they went back to the Rectory, and no further reference was made to the event of the afternoon. Only Joan shut herself up for the rest of the evening with her godchild, and no one thought of disturbing her. School duties were not to be resumed till the following Monday. But from that day no one talked about "the baby"—it was always, from the Rector downwards, "poor little Ruby!"

And the ice once broken, Mr. Carisbroke sometimes visited the nursery, and the household understood that "poor little Ruby" need no longer be kept out of her father's sight.

CHAPTER VI.

"NOTHING BUT DEBTS."

"And some ha' meat and canna eat,
And some can eat that want it,
But we ha' meat and we can eat,
And so the Lord be thankit."

It was rather a curious household which owned Lavinia Carisbroke for its mistress. Inefficient as wife and mother as "poor Louisa" had been, her rule was yet better than none; and her quiet, dull, apathetic ways contrasted agreeably with Miss Carisbroke's despotic and inconsistent sway. In three months every indoor servant had left or given notice; the Rector was continually appealed to; there was open war between Aunt Jane and her two elder nieces, and a general demonstration of rebellion pervaded the domestic atmosphere from the drawing-room to the back kitchen. Everything went amiss, accidents were rife, disasters were manifold—*contretemps* the order of the day! Things came to a crisis early in April, when old cook having departed—wishing "them as didn't know when they was well off might find out summat they didn't know before!"—new cook proved herself most miserably incompetent, and sent up dinners that roused the Rector's utmost indignation, and struck Miss Carisbroke dumb with consternation.

His reverence absolutely glared when a handsome piece of turbot was served up all boiled to rags, and accompanied by lumpy paste, miscalled melted butter. He said little, but ordered his plate to be carried away, its contents scarcely tasted. Then followed a fine leg of mutton, of which no one partook, as it was as nearly raw as meat that had seen the fire could possibly be. The vegetables generally were in a state of *mash*; the pastry was almost as black as the oven from whence it came, — a more ill-cooked, badly-served dinner could scarcely be imagined. Its badness appalled the Rector's very soul; for never—*never* in all his five-and-fifty years had he encountered a

similar experience. He was too well-bred to scold the lady at the head of the table in the presence of her servants ; but he uttered certain sounds which were too well understood by the young ladies, and looked about as amiable as an impending thunder-cloud.

Lavinia knew full well that the storm would burst by-and-by, and remembering some passages in her mother's life-time, she trembled in her embroidered slippers.

"I hope there is, at least, some cheese that *can* be eaten?" quoth the reverend gentleman, as the last course left the room ; "otherwise I shall be starved at my own table."

Happily, the cheese—an exceptionally fine piece of Cheddar—was excellent, and the girls, as well as their father, were glad to make quite a meal off it, with some good, wholesome bread that came from the village, for of late the Rectory family had ceased to "bake at home." *Why* the baking had been discontinued may easily be guessed. Solemnly and sadly was that bread and cheese eaten by all assembled ; Hamlet's "funeral baked-meats" could scarcely have been more lugubriously discussed ; and when the unsatisfactory repast was concluded, Mr. Carisbroke rose from the table saying, slowly, "I will trouble you to join me in the library, Miss Carisbroke, in a quarter of an hour." And when the young lady did not answer, added, in a louder and sterner voice, "Did you hear me, Lavinia?"

"Yes," said poor Lavinia, fairly extinguished and wishing devoutly that old cook were back again, and new cook anywhere but in the Perrywood kitchen.

"Then why did you not answer?" demanded the irate parent. "Did no one ever teach you the rules of common politeness? Were 'manners' of no account in the expensive education you have received?"

"I beg your pardon," was all Lavinia could say. She was terribly frightened, as petty tyrants invariably are the moment they are called to a reckoning by the superior powers. The servant who was removing the plates and glasses laughed in his sleeve, and greatly enjoyed his mistress's evident discomfiture, remarking, as soon as he found himself in the kitchen among his equals "that he

would not be in Miss Carisbroke's shoes for something, for anybody could see the master was in a regular *wax*, and would give it her hot and strong, and serve her right, too, a nasty-tempered, stuck-up little vixen, that thought herself too good to speak a civil word to anybody!"

But as Timkins was thus expounding himself, the library-bell rang, imperatively, and he hastened to answer it. He was back again in half a minute, and looked unutterable things as he said to the cook, "*You're* wanted in there, Mrs. Cook; and don't his reverence look as if his feelings was quite too much for him! I shouldn't wonder if you don't get a month's notice on the spot! And I must say the dinner was *rayther* a failure. Folks don't like to go to the expense of three good courses—fish, and joint, and pastry—and make a meal after all on vulgar bread and cheese! It riles 'em, you see—a man, clergyman or otherwise, don't like to think he's been and asked a blessing on what he didn't get. Says his reverence, says he, 'Grant Thy blessing, O Lord, on these temp'ral supplies of Thy bounty.' And there wasn't no 'temp'ral supplies' 'cept the bread and cheese, and nobody would think of saying grace for *that*."

"You just hold your saucy tongue!" cried the incompetent cook, as she wiped her heated face, and settled her cap before the little hanging mirror. "You'd better not talk about failures! Who smashed that handsome lamp-globe this morning? and who dropped a best sauce-tureen only yesterday? And who——"

But here Mr. Timkins fled, for he perceived that both upper and under housemaids were ready to put in their word; there would have been a fine chorus in another minute had he imprudently remained. Cook was evidently in a fluster, but she put on a clean apron, in which she rolled her arms, and with her nose in the air, "tip-tilted," and "like the petal of a flower,"—that is to say, like the petal of a red peony—adjourned to the sacred precincts of the library.

In a few minutes she returned, with her nose more "tip-tilted" than before, and her lips firmly closed.

"What was it?—what did he want you for?" cried both the housemaids and the little foot-page.

"I wouldn't stop in this 'ere house another week—no! not another night, not to be crowned with gold and stuck all over with diamonds!" said cook, seating herself with her arms akimbo, and with an air of dauntless resolution.

And then it was disclosed that there had been a short but fierce altercation between the lady of the dripping-pan and her displeased master, and that it had terminated in a month's wages and dismissal on the spot.

"And there's a lot of folks coming to dinner to-morrow," said cook, when she had ended her interesting narration; "and I only hope they mayn't be disappointed! I should advise 'em all to make a hearty luncheon afore they comes, and order a good supper to be ready for 'em when they gets home. You won't do no cookin', I s'pose, Mary and Ann—you won't, either of you, undertake the roasts, nor the *entrées*, nor the fish, nor nothink?"

Both ladies solemnly declared they would not so much as boil a potato! They were engaged as housemaids, and would do their duty as such, and be true to themselves! At which assurance cook professed herself much comforted, and remarked that she thought she wanted a muffin and a good strong cup of tea, with *something* in it—indeed, they would all be the better for hot tea and plenty of buttered toast. As for the dinner-things, she wasn't going to wash-up and clear away, and nobody needn't think it!

Leaving the kitchen tea-party, let us adjourn to the library, where Mr. Carisbroke awaited his daughter.

"Oh, do come with me, Maggie," begged Lavinia, almost in tears. "I sha'n't know what to say when I am scolded; I never do, and you have such a ready wit."

"No," answered Miss Margaret, shaking her head, "I am not going to put my finger in that pie! The pater sent for you, and he wants nobody else; and oh, my gracious, Lavinia, how you *will* catch it! I never saw his reverence so angry since I can remember. And if I were you, I'd make haste; it's a full quarter of an hour since we came out of the dining-room; being behind time won't mend the matter, I'm afraid."

"No!" with a deep sigh, and with the air of a person

preparing for the rack, Lavinia Carisbroke walked slowly to the torture-chamber.

She found her father grimly engaged in jotting down figures on a sheet of paper; and the result of his after-dinner arithmetic was apparently displeasing. He did not look up as she entered and closed the door behind her; he was doing a little sum on a scrap of blotting-paper, and she could hear him mutter, "£42 11s. 6d., added to the £8 19s. 7d., and then the old account, and—oh, there you are, Lavinia!"

"Yes, papa; you wanted me."

"I did want you, Lavinia; and I only wish I wanted a more sensible and practical person than yourself! You are no more fit to keep house than that cat on the hearth-rug; and things are come to such a pass that I can endure it no longer. Do you know what you are *spending*, young lady?"

"Yes—no. That is—I began to keep accounts, but somehow I could never make my money balance, and I forgot to put things down, and I am sure the servants cheat. And this cook——"

"Never mind her; she is going—gone by this time."

"Gone?" And Lavinia stared in her extreme consternation, till her father angrily demanded why she stood gaping there just like an idiot! Did she suppose that woman was ever going to cook another meal for him?

"But the dinner to-morrow?" urged Lavinia, almost gasping. "Mr. and Mrs. Somerlow, and those people from the Deanery, and perhaps Colonel and Mrs. Cotton!"

Now, the Rector had entirely forgotten all about the coming banquet—the first party, "to be called a party," as the girls said, since "poor Louisa's" demise; and the discovery of his own forgetfulness in no way tended to improve his temper. One does not like to be caught napping just when one is about to exhort another on the subject of chronic and perverse drowsiness. He simply replied—"Of course, they are coming; they were asked a fortnight ago, and I need not say I expect such a dinner as will not disgrace Perrywood Rectory."

"Who is to cook it, papa?"

"How do I know? Cook it yourself; and then I may think you are good for something? At present, you seem to me a mere piece of lumber in the house—a cumberer of the ground—if not worse! What's a woman worth who cannot roast, and boil, and make a decent pudding!"

"Young ladies don't do such things, papa. They are not taught!"

"So much the worse for the young ladies! I'll have Joan and the twins taught to cook, and to wash and iron, and to make their own dresses! I dare say Miss Martin can teach them. *She's* a woman of sense! Seriously, however, Lavinia, the cook is gone—or on the point of going; I paid her her wages ten minutes ago, and told her if she did not clear out of the house before bed-time, I'd send for a policeman and have her handed out. Such an impudent baggage I never met with! I am sure I don't know what servants are coming to, nowadays; when I told her of that disgraceful dinner—which was no dinner at all, mind!—she replied that people couldn't be expected to be always up to the mark; failures would happen in the kitchen as well as in the parlour; and even a parson might preach a sermon that nobody cared to listen to! I could not believe in such impudence! But I never had to interfere with the servants in your poor mother's time, Lavinia."

"I don't want you to interfere now, papa. Indeed, it always makes servants furious when the master of the house meddles with domestic matters. I don't know what I shall do if cook really goes away to-night, for there is no one in the kitchen to take her place. And I *can't* cook, nor can Maggie. I could as soon build a house as cook a dinner, even a plain one; much less such a one as will be wanted to-morrow evening. Oh, papa, cook *cannot* go!"

"But I tell you she *shall* go, Miss Carisbroke! That disgusting and insolent woman shall not sleep another night under *my* roof! And I suppose you will not dispute that I am master of Perrywood?"

"Oh, dear, no, papa dear; and I should not like you not to be master; and of course you will go your own way.

But what I shall do with nobody in the kitchen, I can't think!"

"Nobody! How you girls do exaggerate! Why, we have *six* house-servants; at least, I pay wages to six, and I dismiss one out of the half-dozen. Surely five servants may do the work of six, for once in a way!"

"But they can't cook, all the five put together."

"Nor can the sixth. Were you not ashamed of the dinner to which we sat down to-day?"

"I was vexed, of course; I wanted my dinner, too, like other people. But I was not ashamed of what was not my fault. I didn't boil the fish to rags, nor under-roast the mutton, nor burn the pies, nor——"

"There! that will do. As I said, you are utterly unfit for the responsibilities you have assumed; the mistress of a house is always accountable for her servants. Every spoiled dish on the table is a disgrace to yourself; the only thing about which you need not concern yourself is the wine. That is my department, for I prefer to be my own butler. But, Lavinia, how did you come to engage this woman, and why did you let old cook go away? She had a temper, I believe; I know your poor dear mother sometimes complained of it; but she could cook a dinner fit for a Lord Mayor. You ought to have kept her—I would have raised her wages, had I known she was discontented. And, in future, remember you are not to dismiss servants without my sanction."

"I didn't dismiss them—they gave notice."

"Humph! It sounds oddly, a whole staff of domestics giving notice together! It is my belief, Miss Carisbroke, that you have a confounded temper of your own! Where you get it from, I can't think! I am one of the most patient men alive, and that dear saint who has left us was meekness itself. Nothing ever ruffled her; the servants never got up a rebellion in her time, dear soul. Aunt Jane never proposed to leave us while your blessed mother lived. I am sure I don't know who would be a widower, with grown-up daughters, and a nursery, and a kitchen full of unruly servants. And what with my studies, my sermons, my parochial duties, and the claims of society, I am pretty nearly driven wild. But you don't tell me, child, how

you were seduced into taking such a creature into the house ! What was her character ? ”

“ She said she was honest and industrious and sober, and knew her work ! How was I to know that she was telling untruths ? ”

“ So ! You left her to supply her own testimonials ! Was that all the character you had with her ? ”

“ Yes.” And Lavinia felt just a little ashamed of herself, for both Aunt Jane and Miss Martin had remonstrated with her on the impulsive haste with which she engaged a person of whom she knew absolutely nothing, and of whose capabilities she was supremely ignorant. Aunt Jane had gone so far as to say that they might all be thankful if no robbery took place, and if they were not murdered in their beds.

“ Lavinia,” said Mr. Carisbroke at length, “ it is barely three months since you assumed the reins of government ; of course, as eldest daughter, you naturally took your sainted mother’s place—it was in some sort your right, no doubt ; but you are causing me already so much anxiety and annoyance, and proving so continually your unfitness for the post you occupy, that I am compelled to think how best you may be superseded.”

“ Superseded ! oh, papa, you would never put any one over me ? ”

“ Not over you, personally, perhaps ; but over the household of which I am the master. Perrywood Rectory *must* have a mistress, and as you are incompetent, it becomes necessary for me to appoint another person in your stead.”

“ Papa ! you would not be so unkind ! It would be so humiliating.”

“ I am sorry, my dear ; but I have almost made up my mind to request you to deliver the keys into your Aunt Jane’s hands. She will not interfere with you and Maggie, and she will look after the servants, which you do not ; whether it is that you *cannot*, or *will not*, I leave to your own conscience.”

“ I give orders ; what more can I do ? ”

“ See that your orders are carried out.”

“ I go into the kitchen every morning, just as mamma did, and the servants seem to be doing their duty.”

"*Seem!* Yes! I dare say things may be in apple-pie order at that particular hour of the day. The old servants were not quite up to the mark, but they were, to the best of my belief, *faithful*; they were to be trusted; they were also capable. Cook, considering we only gave her £20 a-year, did her work very respectably; this woman is clearly ignorant and careless to the last degree, and bold and impudent enough for anything. She is not fit for the house of any Christian gentleman. Then there are the two new housemaids—vulgar, untidy slatterns, fit only for a low-class inn. You have made a wretched choice, Lavinia."

"I'll try to get a better set," said Lavinia, humbly, "but please, papa, don't give the keys to Aunt Jane."

"If the keys remain in your possession, they will soon become an empty sign. Now, Lavinia, listen to me, and I will speak plainly to you; you are nineteen years old, and therefore of an age to understand some of the difficulties of my position, which are, to a great extent, your own. We are growing poorer and poorer every year; a day will come when you and your sisters will have to work for your bread—that is, unless you marry, and I see no signs of suitors as yet."

"Work for our *bread*! Get our own living, do you mean? Papa, you are trying to frighten me!"

"It is the truth, my dear. See! here are five of you—*six*, I mean; I forgot poor little Ruby. When I die—as all fathers must, some day, and I do not think my life will be a long one—I leave nothing behind me for my daughters—nothing but debts."

"Nothing but debts?" faintly echoed Miss Carisbroke.

She was beginning to be really frightened. Her father looked terribly in earnest—as if he meant actually what he said. That such a vulgar, distasteful, ugly thing as *poverty* should ever come near her was as far as possible from Lavinia's thoughts.

Mr. Carisbroke simply repeated his words, and with an added emphasis that absolutely scared his daughter, "*Nothing but debts!*"

"But, papa, I don't—I can't understand! Why should we be poorer than we were? Why should you be in debt?"

"My income has not increased, while my expenses have doubled and trebled themselves within the last few years. That is very simple, is it not? Quite easy to comprehend? If I allow you £40 a-month as housekeeping money, and you spend regularly £50 or £55 monthly, what must be the result?"

Now this was precisely what Lavinia had done, though as yet she was scarcely aware of the awful fact. Very few of the tradesmen's accounts had come in; but what she had seen filled her with dismay. She had given her orders recklessly, had made all sorts of bad bargains, and had economised very much after the fashion of those unfortunates whom the world calls "penny wise and pound foolish!" She did not speak, but sat abject and miserable, and on the verge of tears. Her father resumed: "You know the value of this living of Perrywood, Lavinia; it is £1,200 per annum—neither more nor less. When I married your mother she had an income of £700 a-year; rather over £700, in fact. It was about as much as we could spend comfortably in those days, and not a bit too much. Gradually, as the family increased—child after child was born, you know, and there were more mouths to fill, and more shoes and stockings and frocks to buy, and more servants to keep—our £1,900 a-year became too little. We had to part with some of the principal of your mother's fortune, a proceeding which relieved the pressure of the moment at the cost of future income. Then came Frank's expenses; and a very *dear* son he is likely to prove to me. Two years ago his poor mother paid his debts without any reference to myself—of course, to her own impoverishment. Now I have to find, I scarcely dare to think how much, and I know no more where it is to come from than you do, Lavinia. Then there is the undertaker's bill, and the mourning—a whole household cannot be put into handsome mourning for a trifling sum, while the regular tradesmen's accounts are heavier than before. There must be an alteration—a ruthless cutting down of expenses, whether *I* like it—whether *you* like it, or not!"

"Miss Martin is an immense expense. Cut her down to £50 a-year, or let her go. Mrs. Skinner only gives her governess £30 a-year, and she has seven pupils, and

two of the little ones sleep in her bedroom, which saves the cost of a second nursemaid; for, of course, Miss Jones washes and dresses the children, and attends to their wardrobe. Mrs. Skinner says she is quite a treasure!"

"I dare say. And two years ago I might have been of Mrs. Skinner's opinion, perhaps; but I began to perceive how very shallow was the education you and Maggie had received. Just tell me, Lavinia, what would *you* do if you had to turn out next week and earn your own living?"

"Really, I don't know, papa! Why will you say such very unpleasant things?"

"Because these very unpleasant things will probably come to pass. Come, my dear, don't shirk the question; what *would* you do?"

"Why, of course, I must go out as governess! It would be very horrible, and I should lose caste for ever; but it's all nonsense, I know. We may not be very well off, by-and-by; but it cannot be that we shall have to *work*—like common people."

"When the time comes you may think yourself very fortunate if you can find work to do. You could not teach, Lavinia, for you are wofully ignorant; I cannot see that you do any one thing really well; and I am afraid you know nothing perfectly. I am determined that your younger sisters shall be better taught, and more wisely trained. If they can be made into sensible, useful women, I shall feel that Miss Martin's salary was the best investment I ever made. And now you may go. You need not concern yourself about the cook; I have paid her her wages up to to-day, and a month in advance, in lieu of notice."

"But, papa! the dinner to-morrow?"

"Must be cooked, of course. I cannot put these people off now. I wish to be alone. Send me in a cup of strong tea in half an hour's time; afterwards, I must have a talk with your aunt."

Lavinia went away with a feeling at her heart, somewhat akin to despair. The two questions that just now so painfully exercised her small mind were—"Would Aunt Jane, as mistress of the keys, lay claim to the head of the table?" and—"How was the morrow's dinner to be cooked, the Rectory kitchen being *cookless*?"

CHAPTER VII.

MELIORA TO THE RESCUE.

Moderate your expenses now, at first
As you may keep the same proportion still,
Nor stand so much on your gentility.

MISS CARISBROKE, once more clear of the library, indulged in what masculine writers generally describe as "the truly feminine luxury of a good cry," and I must confess that I think she had "something to cry for." It was not so much her father's expressed anger that disturbed her mind, as the calm disclosures he had made, and the patent difficulties that lay immediately before her. First and foremost came the morrow's dinner, which might not be deferred; secondly, the prospect of "knocking under" to Aunt Jane, whom she had treated *de haut-en-bas* for the last three months; thirdly, and lastly, the vague but awful possibilities of sinking from her present state of young ladyhood into the debased rank of a poor dependent, or a daily worker for her bread. For Lavinia had a most genuine contempt for any woman, not being a domestic servant, who earned her own living by toil of hands or brain; nor would she even allow that such a person could possibly be classed as a *real lady*, and, as such, on an equality with herself.

Maggie found her in the morning-room sobbing violently. "Now then," said she, "what *is* the matter? You have been having a horrible time of it, no doubt; but where is the use of sitting down to cry like that? It *was* a very bad dinner, I must confess, and you know the great event of a man's day is his dinner; I told you that new cook was not at all up to her work. But I wouldn't fret in that way; you will be quite ugly to-morrow. Dear me, Lavinia, a few sharp words won't hurt you. I am surprised at you! What is a scolding, be it ever so bad?"

"It is not so much *that*, Maggie!" And then Lavinia

proceeded to give a full, true, and particular account of affairs in general, not sparing her forebodings as to the future, nor her despair as to the actual present, as regarded the dinner, that ought to have been already ordered and was not. Maggie became deeply meditative, while her sister relapsed into moody silence. At length the younger girl said, gravely, "Do you know, Lavinia, I have had my own doubts latterly as to the family prosperity? Frank is going it at a fine pace, as we both too well know; expenses increase, and income don't; so it doesn't take very much acuteness to find out that we are quietly but surely going to the bad! You and I must marry, Lavinia—and marry well; that is the only way in which we can help papa."

"That is more easily said than done. Eligible suitors are not exactly plentiful in these parts, and we are not beauties, nor geniuses, nor heiresses. Still, I agree with you, that we should most effectually assist papa by marrying, and so taking ourselves well off his hands. What can a girl do to provide for herself but marry?"

"What, indeed!" rejoined Margaret. "I suppose the *pater* would not like to see us turn out—like Meliora—as governesses, nor wish us to take in plain sewing, nor advertise ourselves as dressmakers and milliners."

"Not much fear of our shocking social prejudices in that way, Maggie. I don't think we *could* teach properly, though we did learn a heap of things in our schoolroom days. As to dressmaking, we can neither of us sew decently—I fancy, though, I *could* trim a bonnet if I tried. But all that is, I—I hope, in the far futurity: never mind the bread and cheese for this time seven years: let us think about the *menu* for to-morrow."

"Is the cook really gone?"

"Really gone! and the housemaids pretend they don't know mutton-chops from veal cutlets. What shall I do? I *won't* fling myself on Aunt Jane, even if I dissolve bodily before the kitchen fire."

"You were always a capital hand at a *menu*, and here's the cookery book. Let us sit down and concoct a glorious bill of fare. What is easier?"

"Nothing; except, perhaps, spoiling every dish we

attempt. I know what we ought to have in April, of course; but I don't know how to get it, and it is not to be expected that I should turn kitchen-maid and cook. Will you undertake the tiresome, stupid dinner—undertake its providing, and due appearance upon the table, Maggie?"

"That I will *not*. No, my dear; while you retain the honours, you must stick to the responsibilities. I don't mind making a little '*whip*' for trifle, or blanching a few almonds, or arranging some flowers and candied fruits in the large epergne!"

"Joan will do that, and think herself greatly favoured in being permitted to help. It is real help that I want, Maggie!"

"If by real help you mean standing over the fire, and popping one's hands into the oven, and staining the ends of one's fingers, and all that, I must say I am not prepared to give it. In the first place, I do not understand cookery, and should be sure to make a regular *hash* of it, even if I tried my best; and in the second place, I have no housewifery ambitions. I mean to marry a man who can ensure me a well-appointed establishment. You really must excuse me, if I decline to put in my oar; you are 'Miss Carisbroke,' thank goodness! and you must pay for your position."

"You are unkind, very unkind, Maggie."

"No, I am not, for I am really sorry for your dilemma; but I cannot pretend to do what is as much beyond my powers as putting a girdle round the globe. I assure you you have my sympathy."

"I have heard say that a little help is better than a great deal of sympathy—or pity—which, I suppose, is pretty much the same thing."

"I don't believe it is; let's ask *Meliora*; she is a philosopheress and metaphysician, and all the rest of it—she will be sure to know. I feel certain that pity and sympathy are not synonymous."

"Oh dear, Maggie, how provoking you are! What do I care about metaphysics! Pity or sympathy, it is all one; I want *help*."

"And there, again, I think you had better go to

Meliora. I don't know, of course ; but it is my conviction that she could cook a dinner single-handed, if need were. I am not sure that she could not make a steam engine, or do electro-plating, or manage a farm, or sweep a chimney, or——”

“There, that will do ! I am not going to ask favours of Miss Martin ; I hate her.”

“I am not particularly fond of her ; but I do not see why one should not make use of her ; and she is certainly what the Yankees call a ‘woman of faculty.’ I would clasp any hand that would drag me out of the quagmire ; and you are in one now, Lavinia, and no mistake.”

“I am in a regular Slough of Despond, and if I succeed in floundering out of it, bespattered all over with mud, and more dead than alive, it is as much as I can hope for.”

“What's the matter ?” exclaimed a sharp voice close at hand. “Who is in the Slough of Despond, and who put the some one into it ?”

“Oh, Aunt Jane, you were not in to dinner,” said Lavinia, dolefully. She was beginning to feel quite broken down.

“Lucky for her she was not,” interrupted Maggie. “I dare say she has revelled in spring-chickens and asparagus, and cutlets of salmon, or something of that sort, at old Mrs. Elford's ; *we* have been obliged to sustain nature on bread and cheese, Aunt Jane !”

“Did the butcher and the fishmonger *both* fail you ?” asked Aunt Jane, not a little surprised. “Why, I chose the turbot myself, as fresh and firm a bit of fish as I ever saw, and the prime cut, too ; and the butcher promised to send up a tender, juicy leg, well hung ; I was very particular in insisting on its being properly hung.”

“The mutton might have been good enough ; I dare say it was,” said Maggie ; “but it was scorched outside, and absolutely raw inside. Just fit for cannibals in their first stage of conversion, I should think ! As for the fish, it had to be helped with a spoon.”

“What a shame ! But I always told you, my dear, that woman was an impostor ! It's my opinion that her cookery is about equal to your German, Lavinia. You could as well pass an examination in ‘Goethe’ as that

creature could serve up a respectable dinner for six persons. Why, if she only boils three eggs for breakfast, one of them is sure to be hard enough to slice up for the salad-bowl, while a second is utterly uneatable till it has been returned to the saucepan. The third egg *may* be fit for the table—or it may not! She a cook, indeed! You had better give her notice, Lavinia."

"I have no longer any option. Papa has sent her away—paid her a month's wages, and ordered her out of the house. She is gone."

"The best piece of news I have heard for ever so long! A more impudent, ignorant person I never encountered. She was not only a bad cook, but a bad woman, I am well persuaded. We shall do better without her, girls."

"That is all very well," replied Lavinia, "but there are six or eight people coming to dinner to-morrow evening, and what we are going to give them to eat I cannot think."

"People to dinner to-morrow, my dear! you said nothing about it."

"The truth is, I had forgotten all about it till I was eating my bread and cheese, an hour ago. Then I suddenly recollected that no *menu* had been arranged, no preparations made; and when I found that the cook was gone, I felt ready to faint."

"Poor Lavinia! I dare say you did. But, my dear, you need not mourn her departure. I regard it as a blessing, for her reign here has been one series of blunders and disasters. Depend upon it, she would have covered you with disgrace, and half-poisoned your guests into the bargain."

"She was a wretch!" cried Lavinia, passionately, bursting afresh into tears; "but *how* is this detestable dinner to come to pass? Will you try what you can do, Aunt Jane?"

"I don't mind lending a helping hand, my dear—I always like to feel myself useful. But I decline anything approaching to responsibility. I will carry out your instructions, if you will give them; more I cannot promise. You know, girls, I am no cook and never was; some women seem to be born *chefs*!—I could name a lady who will practise Beethoven and Mendelssohn, or read *Dante*,

or embroider and paint all the morning, and then go and toss up an *omelette* fit for the Queen—to say nothing of the daintiest little made dishes and the most delicious puddings—and afterwards sit down to table beautifully dressed, looking as if she had known nothing about the dinner beforehand, and charming all the company with her vivacity and wit. I can nurse, as you have seen, and I can do a little sewing when my eyes are good. I am a pretty good French scholar, and I know my Shakespeare and Tennyson, but I am not a cook. I could not broil a chop, or boil a potato unaided, to save my life, unless I succeeded by accident, like the almanacs when they forecast the next year's weather."

"What *shall* I do?"

"Go to Meliora. She can do most things, so I dare say she can cook! Indeed, I saw her instructing Joan in the mysteries of making good toast the other morning. I shall be very much disappointed if she cannot send up a dinner worthy of *Soyer* himself. It is a part of her creed, I know, that a woman's education embraces a great deal beyond music, languages, &c. In fact, she goes in for general knowledge in every department, including domestic economy. Joan is becoming quite clever under her tuition; Netta and Brenda are such little idiots they will not learn at any price. They *won't* bestir themselves."

"I don't blame them," sullenly returned Lavinia. "What business has a governess—a *finishing* governess—to bother her pupils with culinary lessons! She is wasting her own time, for which she is paid, and that of the girls also; I shall not allow it."

"And some of her lessons are actually *scullenary* lessons!" laughed Maggie. "One would think Joan had a chance of a situation as a scullery-maid in prospect. She and her governess were actually washing up the breakfast things the other morning. And there was Meliora with a big apron on, dabbling her fingers in scalding water, and extolling the virtues of *ammonia* in cleansing dirty plates, and holding forth on the uses and abuses of kitchen cloths; and Joan was drinking it all in like a fairy-tale."

"It must be put a stop to," said Lavinia, angrily. "It

is enough to make poor mamma come out of her grave ! She never made us wash up dishes, and prepare our own toast. I expect those unfortunate children will be expected to scrub the schoolroom floor and black the grate, next thing. It shall not go on."

"I would advise you not to interfere, my dear," was Aunt Jane's quiet rejoinder. "Your papa is most anxious that Miss Martin should pursue her own method, unchecked, with her pupils; it is quite understood that she takes her authority immediately and solely from him. And really, girls, both of you would be none the worse for a little instruction in domestic matters. I only wish some one like Meliora had come to me in my young days, and given me a few simple lessons in common domestic duties. And it is a great pity, Lavinia, that you encourage Netta and Brenda in their laziness and stupid rebellion."

"I've a great mind to go to bed and stop there," said Miss Carisbroke, bitterly. "I hate everything and everybody."

"Not a pleasant frame of mind, I should say. But I do not think your scheme would answer. There is but one thing to be done, and that is to consult Meliora; if she cannot help us, we are undone, and our visitors must take pot-luck, and very bad luck it will be."

"Consult her then, yourself—I don't care."

"I shall do nothing of the sort. Such a request must come from the lady of the house; I am quite certain that Miss Martin will not respond to the suggestions of any other person. She knows what is due to herself."

"Will you be spokeswoman, if I am present, Aunt Jane?"

"Yes, I will. But if you are ungracious, Lavinia, I will at once desert, and leave you to fight your own battles. Come, there is not a moment to lose; Miss Martin is in the schoolroom now, I dare say. By this time to-morrow evening the dinner ought to have been eaten—the dinner, of which, at present, we have no *carte*."

"Well, if it must be, it must be!" grumbled Lavinia. "Come along, Maggie; let us go and pay our court to the incomparable Meliora. I wonder whoever gave her so absurd a name?"

Meliora, as they had expected, was found in the school-

room with her pupils. Netta was dozing over a book ; Brenda was lazily practising her scales ; Joan was reading French with Meliora. A basketful of needlework was on the table, for the baby was being " short-coated," and the governess and the young godmother had practically undertaken the business, though it was supposed to be in the hands of Aunt Jane. But Aunt Jane, though gifted with much sound sense, and fully appreciating Miss Martin and the improvement which was being wrought in Joan, was, nevertheless, a true Carisbroke, and shared the family inheritance of dislike to too much work. She could see, almost as plainly as Meliora herself, the dismal mismanagement, past and present, at Perrywood Rectory, and she was beginning really to recognise the necessity which existed for a thorough reform in the family politics ; still, it came quite naturally to her to shift her own burden, as soon as ever it began to press, on to the shoulders of any one who seemed able and willing to bear the load.

The reading and practising came to an end, and Meliora was soon in possession of most of the facts which it was requisite she should know, in order to induce her in good earnest to put her shoulder to the wheel. She asked a few straightforward questions, and Lavinia condescended to reply to them with something like civility ; for some instinct told her that she had better behave politely, since it was quite on the cards that Meliora would coolly refuse to interfere in what was certainly no business of hers. And Meliora's firm, smooth hand seemed the only one that was capable of dragging Miss Carisbroke out of her Slough of Despond, and landing her on firm ground ! It was a curious fact that Lavinia, the autocrat, the petty despot of the house, stood more in dread of her father's just displeasure than any other member of the family, Master Frank not excepted.

" Let me quite understand you, Miss Carisbroke," said Meliora, presently. " I am to undertake this dinner on my own responsibility, and I am to do exactly as I please, as regards stores, servants' help, &c. If I promise that an excellent dinner shall be served to-morrow at seven o'clock, you on your part must agree to find me all that is

requisite. Not being a witch, I cannot compose a meat-soup out of vegetables, nor make rich gravies from bare bones! Give me the materials, and all shall go well."

"Oh, you may have *anything* you like!" replied Lavinia, feeling greatly relieved. "And you shall be sole mistress of the kitchen; the servants shall have strict orders to obey you implicitly, and we will send into Massington for any extras you may want, the first thing in the morning. I won't interfere, you may be sure."

"Thank you. But I think I had better consult you about the bill of fare. I only wish you had spoken a little earlier, for soups and gravies ought to be made the day before the feast. However, we will do our best. No! that soup *cannot* be got ready in time; we will substitute another that takes only a few hours to prepare. Oh, yes! there can be some creams, but the jelly must now be ordered from Ruske's. Had we not better make a list at once of what must be sent for, and despatch a messenger very early in the morning?"

"Of course," said Maggie, snatching up pen and paper, and beginning to enter into the spirit of the thing. Joan's eyes sparkled. "We shall have to help, shall we not, Meliora?" she inquired.

"Most certainly," was the rejoinder. "The usual lessons must be omitted to-morrow, and we will have a regular cooking-class. You can *all* do something."

"Can we?" asked both the twins, simultaneously. "Oh, what fun!" Netta and Brenda rather enjoyed the prospect of whisking eggs, and peeling almonds and stirring custards, together with opportunities for *tasting*, which were sure to occur; and there would be plenty of good things about—sugar and almonds, candied peel, lemon-sponge, and jams—especially strawberry and raspberry, for which the twins had a decided preference.

"And Joan?" asked Brenda.

"Joan will have enough to do. She will have to help me with the gravies and sauces. And I shall expect Mary and Ann to do our bidding."

"I only hope they may," said Aunt Jane, dubiously; "they are mightily independent damsels, and may possibly do mischief instead of rendering aid. But if *I* can be of

any service, Miss Martin, I shall be most happy ! I can at least do exactly as I am told."

"Thank you," replied Meliora, a little doubtfully, thinking that it would be easier to do things herself than to give detailed directions all round. "I dare say," she added, "we shall find something for you to do, Miss Jane ; but we must not forget that 'too many cooks spoil the broth.'"

Late that evening Mr. Carisbroke had a long conversation with his sister in the library. She absolutely refused to assume the reins of government so far as to accept the insignia of office ; but she promised to engage fresh servants, and to ascertain whether they were fully competent and reliable. And then the Rector confessed that he found himself in no small difficulty as regarded money matters. Very few of the Christmas bills were paid, nor any of the funeral expenses ; Frank had made a clean sweep of all available funds, and he was still considerably in debt at Oxford ! And now Lady Day had come and gone, and fresh quarterly bills were already pouring in, with polite requests for speedy settlements, each obsequious tradesman having an unusually heavy account to meet at no very distant date. Mr. Carisbroke was getting really harassed, for he saw no way of extricating himself from his embarrassments, and Jane could only recommend "*retrenchment* !"

"Ah," he said, dolefully, "it is easy to prescribe, but very difficult to carry out. I haven't bought a book or a picture since poor Louisa's death ; but the household expenditure exceeds more than ever. Lavinia must be terribly extravagant, or else most careless."

"She is inexperienced, and she is wilful," replied the aunt, "and I do think it is a mistake bringing up girls in perfect ignorance of domestic responsibilities. A young woman, unless she have a fortune of her own, should know something of household matters, and even if she be an heiress, a little knowledge would not come amiss ; for how can an ignorant fine lady be otherwise than at the mercy of her servants ? and servants are not what they were in our young days, Francis, I am sorry to say."

"I suppose not," he replied, gravely ; "everybody is

saying how increasingly difficult it is to find capable and trustworthy servants even at high wages. Do you think, Jane, we might do with fewer maids in the kitchen? That would be a real retrenchment, you know."

"I am afraid not; this is a very large house, and we are a large family; we should require a first-rate woman in the nursery, if it were not that Joan and I look so much after poor little Ruby."

"What a mite that child is! I was looking at her the other day while she slept on Joan's lap. Joan herself was twice her size at three months old."

"Little Ruby is small, but I believe she is healthy. Do you know, Francis, I think she will turn out *pretty*!"

"She is almost as dark as a mulatto."

"So were you, I have heard our mother say, when you were a baby."

"Well! I have no objection to a really pretty daughter! And I should not wonder if Joan developed into a fine-looking young woman by-and-by. But I sometimes think, Jane, these young ones may have a troublesome life before them! I shall not live to see poor little Ruby grow up; I sometimes fancy my latter end is not so far away. I shall never make old bones."

Aunt Jane tried to reassure her brother, but she could not succeed. Nor could she herself resume her former cheerfulness. Francis was not old by any means; but his health was not what it used to be; and if he should "be taken" at no remote period, what would become of all these girls, brought up to expensive, not to say extravagant habits, with very limited income—if any! and with no idea of economising or of earning money, much or little. Truly, Francis Carisbroke had good reason for the paternal anxiety which was beginning to weigh heavily upon him. His wife's death had to some extent roused him from the apathy and self-indulgent complacency in which all the best years of his life had been wasted.

Late—*too late*—he began to repent him of the days that were gone. Shadows and darkness were gathering about his path, and he knew it, all too well.

Next day Meliora was as good as her word. She and her pupils, aided not ineffectually by the servants, did their

work right womanfully, the result being a dinner which caused Mrs. Dean to envy Lavinia her kitchen staff, and to whisper if ever her cook wanted a change, as first-class servants do sometimes, she would be only too happy to ask for her testimonials.

Meliora, who late in the evening had put on her gloves and joined the party in the drawing-room, dared not look at Joan, who had evidently heard the lady's stage-aside, lest their sympathetic merriment should become irrepressible!

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHAT DOES SEQUESTRATION MEAN?"

Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!
Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.
Too late, too late; ye cannot enter now.

It was some little time before Mr. Carisbroke discovered to whom he was actually indebted for one of the best dinners that had ever been eaten in his house; and in all probability the secret would never have been disclosed had not Netta and Brenda one day in his presence referred to that cream "that *we* made." Lavinia, when complimented on her unprecedented success, had disingenuously replied that it was "managed somehow!" Maggie kept dead silence on the subject, and Joan, who was greatly disgusted at her sister's want of candour, disdained to enlighten those whom it might have concerned. Why Aunt Jane said nothing to the purpose it was difficult to guess; it was generally believed, however, that Meliora herself had requested that her name should not be mentioned in connection with that memorable banquet.

But the hint once given, Mr. Carisbroke was not slow to profit by it; he listened to the twins while they prattled of cream and isinglass and vanilla, greatly astonished at

their apparent familiarity with such things as culinary ingredients, and he proceeded, with no small amount of curiosity, to question them. The result was his complete enlightenment, and he learned, to his surprise, to whom the credit was really due; and when he asked Lavinia why she accepted praises which were not her due, her answer was, "Well, you know, I could not very well explain; and as Miss Martin said nothing herself, I thought perhaps she would not care to have the matter discussed beyond the schoolroom. It is a funny idea, though, for a governess to cook a dinner; and some people might think it was queer of her."

"She is one of the finest specimens of womankind I have ever encountered!" was Mr. Carisbroke's hearty reply. "If only half her sex resembled her, the world would go on its way infinitely better than it does! There would be far less trouble and fewer discords, and 'family jars' would be unheard of!"

Lavinia smiled unpleasantly, and looked at Maggie with an expression which was intended to remind her of a certain prediction not long since uttered, and now perhaps about to be verified. Maggie shrugged her shoulders and laughed; but neither of the girls dared to give vent to the innuendoes trembling on their lips!

"Yes, you may laugh," resumed the reverend gentleman; "but I find nothing to awaken derision in the fact of a woman being as accomplished as is Miss Martin. I wish you would profit by the example. Talk of 'women of faculty'—one who can cook a dinner, and cut out clothes, and make a dress, and play Beethoven and Mendelssohn, and sketch correctly, and do equations, and——"

"Oh, papa, for mercy sake, *stop!*" cried Maggie; "of course she ought to be canonised. St. Meliora would sound very well, I am sure. I only wish she were not quite so exemplary, for my own part, for the very sight of her activity wearies and depresses my spirits. She gets up before anybody in the house, and I don't believe she ever wants to go to bed; she is never tired, never out of sorts, never out of temper, never in the wrong, always equal to the situation of the hour, what-

ever it may be. It is my belief that if there were a famine in the land, she would be found to have stores of food for us all to eat; if we were *ruined*, even, I am not sure but that she would put us on our feet again, after a few gentle words of reprimand and caution."

"I wish she may be equal to the latter achievement," said Mr. Carisbroke, significantly; "it may be that her capabilities in that particular may be ere long tested. I know it is of no use to talk to you foolish girls; you will not hear the thunder in the distance, or hearing it, you refuse obstinately to take warning. The day will come when you will surely regret the vain security which leads you to deride those who live their life instead of dreaming it." Which remark, by the way, was rather hard upon Mr. Carisbroke's daughters, considering that he had always set them an example of dreaming; neglecting his sacred duties, as far as he could do so without obloquy, and spending his days in luxurious retirement, indulging his refined and æsthetic fancies, and seeing visions of wonderful things which might be done, if only he had the opportunity—if only he could brace his energies to make a good beginning! For years he had built his aerial castles, without laying the foundations of a single substantial edifice. For years he had contemplated various ideals, to which, had he been differently situated, he might have attained, without ever setting himself to overcome a single one of the barriers that stood in his way.

And there had been a time when he chose as his motto "*En avant!*" and when it had seemed to him the easiest thing in the world to live to God's glory, and to gain the victory in the great battle-field of life. Alas! the battle had never been fought, and yet he had not been wilfully a deserter. Time after time he had loitered when the trumpets called to action, season after season had he waited for one more convenient, which never came—never would come, now! For he had seen his fifty-sixth birthday, an age at which it is almost impossible to awake to the energy and strength which are born of courage, faith, and self-denial. He was conscious that he was no longer the man he had been, either physically or

mentally ; conscious that the long, apathetic inaction had rusted away the powers that once he had gloried in ; that his sun had long since passed its meridian, that the morning and early afternoon of life had been wasted, and that the night, wherein no man may work, was not far distant.

One day he was turning over an old desk, and he found the seal which nearly forty years before he had caused to be engraved with his chosen motto. Yes ! there it was—“ *En avant !* ” fresh and clear as when it first was cut. Oh, what a mockery it seemed ! The words ought to be obliterated, and in their stead engraved—“ Too late ! too late ! ” And he said to himself, “ I have been a *fainéant* ! a coward and a sluggard ; and I might have been a nineteenth-century Bayard—*sans peur et sans reproche* ! Oh, are there any sadder words than *I might have been* ? And now it is too late. I must sit still and watch the rising of the waters that must overwhelm me and mine. Poor children they, to have only a *fainéant* for their father ! ”

And the proceeds of the living were fully anticipated for at least three years to come ; and creditors who, out of respect to the cloth, had been most tolerant, were growing impatient and suspicious ; and money-lenders, who cared nothing for his holy office, were beginning to clamour, and to threaten the unwelcome process of *sequestration*. The burden had been gradually and slowly accumulating for the last ten years ; he had tried to ignore it, refusing, indeed, to contemplate its ever-increasing dimensions ; and now it was being forced upon him ; he could no longer pass it by with only a rueful glance, a transitory spasm of dread ; he was bound, willing or unwilling, to take it up and feel its unwelcome pressure. The weight was almost more than he could bear.

And it must be borne alone ; that was now the cruellest part of it. If he complained to his sister, she lectured him for his improvidence, and had no word of counsel or of comfort ; if he told his daughters that trouble was impending, they were only vexed and impatient ; they did not seem to credit the truth of the oft-repeated warning.

Frank was still at Oxford, spending all the money he could handle, and a great deal more. If Louisa had lived, Mr. Carisbroke's condition would have been no better, for she hated talks about business, and did not, in fact, understand one-half of what was said to her. Her husband had tried conversing with her in early days, but had always retired from the field, baffled and beaten by her strange obtuseness, and her exasperating meaningless replies. As she had grown older she became more and more commonplace, more lethargic, more self-indulgent, till some of her friends were almost inclined to question whether she really possessed a *soul*! Still, her death had been a blow; and Mr. Carisbroke had been conscious of a painful void and blank ever since her departure from this world; he knew she would have been helpless and useless in any kind of crisis—nay, if the worst came to the worst, she must have been an actual incumbrance; but for all that, he thought he would have felt less desolate had she been at hand to listen to his complaints, and to answer vaguely and beside the mark, and sleepily assure him that things *could not* be as bad as he apprehended, and that all would come right before long.

So the spring and summer passed wearily. Aunt Jane went away on a long visit into Scotland; Meliora took her month's vacation. Joan spent nearly all her time in the nursery; the twins alternately ate, drank, and drowsed, or read novels, or wept together over the unkindness of Lavinia and Margaret, who by turns scolded and neglected them. The keys were still in Miss Carisbroke's keeping, of course; and she and Maggie were supposed jointly to "keep house." Management there was none; instead thereof there was *muddle*—which Miss Braddon has ingeniously described as "the maximum of expense with the minimum of comfort."

No one, not even the Rector and Joan, knew what Meliora had been at Perrywood all those months till her place there was empty. Her silent influence had been marvellous; her help in countless matters unobtrusive but effectual; she was missed everywhere—in the kitchen as in the drawing-room, in the schoolroom and in the nursery. Lavinia, who had been glad to see her drive away,

began to count the days till she might be expected "home!" Maggie was fain to confess that the house was not nearly so cheerful, and certainly not nearly so comfortable in her absence. The servants, with one exception, refrained from giving their nominal mistress the usual notice, simply because "Miss Martin would be back again, directly"! Mr. Carisbroke felt as if deserted by his good genius.

It was the end of September when she returned, and Perrywood was still in its autumnal beauty. I think every one, either openly or secretly, rejoiced at her return. Lavinia had quite a heap of confidences ready for her—the servants' wages were not paid, the store-room was almost empty, and the tradespeople looked glum when she gave fresh orders, and frequently neglected them altogether; unpleasant little notes, sometimes addressed to the Rector, and sometimes to herself, were almost daily delivered; all their mourning was worn out and shabby, and where were fresh dresses to come from? And, worst of all, papa said, when she humbly asked for money, that he had none to give her, and that she must rub on as best she could! The girls had talked over all these vexations and difficulties between themselves, but for all their talking were none the forwarder; the store-room and the housekeeping purse were still empty, the tradesmen's bills still unsettled, the shabby gowns and mantles growing rustier and limper day by day. Lavinia and Maggie would soon be obliged to go to church in their hats for want of bonnets; the flounces of the twins were fast becoming rags; Joan's skirts would soon require to be once more lengthened, or, rather, renewed.

"Well!" said Maggie one morning, when she had ruefully turned over her own and her elder sister's wardrobe; "money or dresses we *must* have if we are to go out-of-doors, or see anybody at home. When is Meliora coming back?"

"Next Thursday, I believe."

"Thank heaven! She will make papa hear reason. He won't listen to *us*."

"Do you think it can be true, Maggie, that he really has no money in the bank?"

"I am afraid it is, though I cannot in the least understand it. He says the bill for our summer dresses and things was 'the last straw on the camel's back.' What does he mean?"

"How can I tell? That bill did not take all his money, because it is still unpaid, and Madame Laure is bothering me for it most shamefully. And the heaps and heaps of things we have had from her for the last ten years! How shockingly ungrateful servants, and tradespeople, and all that kind of folk generally are!"

"Well, Lavinia, I suppose people want their money, and I don't know that they are so very unreasonable. It is all papa's fault; he *must* give us some directly! We'll set Meliora on him, as soon as ever she comes back; nobody else can tackle him to any purpose."

"And she may refuse! Once or twice she has declined to interfere when I have begged her to speak for me. But, as you say, papa *must* replenish our purses! it is simply absurd keeping us with empty pockets in this stupid fashion. Frank cannot have spent all the year's income! Why, the living alone is £1,200 per annum, as the 'Clergy List' tells us. And then there is poor mamma's fortune! If that is somehow muddled away through bad management, the glebe money and the tithes, and all the rest of it, cannot be got rid of on any terms. I know enough law for that. The living is only papa's for life, and really belongs to Lord Battledowns."

"But can't a living be—what's it called?—if a clergyman is in debt?"

"I know what you mean—*sequestered*! I believe it can be; and I am almost sure that Perrywood Rectory is to be *that*. But I do not exactly know what sequestration implies. Norland Vale is said to be 'a sweet sequestered spot.' I don't see how Perrywood is to be moved into a lonely district. I am sure it is dull enough already!"

"It cannot mean that; it's out of the question. Oh! here comes Joan with her baby. Let us set her to find out. I am too lazy to 'overhaul the volume, and when found, make a note of.' Joan, give me little Ruby, while you run into the library, and turn over the 'Cyclopædia' till

you come to 'sequestration.' We want to know the precise meaning of the word."

"Oh! I can tell you at once," replied Joan, most unwilling to surrender her precious Ruby to the unaccustomed arms, in which she never failed to scream with all the power of her lungs. "Meliora made me hunt it out the other day, because I had somehow heard the word, and wanted to know what it meant. It is a law term, and it is used to signify an *execution for debt* against a clergyman—I think it said 'a *beneficed* clergyman,' in which case the debt is satisfied out of the tithes and other proceeds of the living. That's it, I know, for I wrote it down in my common-place book, that I might not forget. Meliora says it is good to remember the exact words; it fixes a definition in your memory."

"I dare say it does," said Maggie, gravely. "There, take your child away, Joan; she is going to squall! What an ill-tempered little animal it is! I never look at her, but she scowls and roars. She ought to have been christened Xantippe!"

"She never squalls with me, the little precious!" said Joan indignantly, as she kissed the tiny features that were screwing themselves up with too evident intent. "Let us go into the south garden, Ruby, my jewel, and get a little sunshine while we may. It shall have its own Meliora at home again on Thursday. There, sit up, my beauty; let us go, we are not wanted here."

"I was afraid it meant *that*!" said Margaret, as soon as she and Lavinia were left alone. "It is worse, though, than I thought. The living will bring in no more money till the debts are paid, or as Joan said, '*satisfied*.' It seems to me that we shall have next to nothing to live upon. What *shall* we do?"

"Don't let us talk about it, Maggie; we only bother ourselves. Let us leave it till Meliora comes; I dare say she will think of something."

"Even *she* cannot stop the sequestration, I am afraid."

"No, but she will manage *something* for us; she always does, you know. Papa may well say she is 'a woman of resources.' I wonder what it is she *cannot* do?"

"Turn counters into sovereigns, old letters into bank-

notes! Nevertheless, I shall be glad when she comes back, for if there is anything to be done, she will do it. I don't like her in my heart one bit better than I did a year ago; but she is of use, and she has come between us and many a quarrel with papa. Poor papa! he has been shockingly cross of late. I hope *Meliora* will improve his temper!"

"It wants improving, I must say. If you so much as mention certain things, he almost snaps your nose off with his sharp rejoinder. He does get so angry; if he were not a clergyman, I do believe he would *swear*! No! I don't care for *Meliora*; she is a perpetual reproach to me in one way or another; but I trust her—my only hope is in her. She will do what she can; and she is so clever, and has so many resources, that I sometimes think she can do whatever she will."

"Do you know, *Lavinia*, I don't think, after all, it would be such a very bad thing if papa married her! Not just yet, of course; but presently, when we may decently go out of mourning."

"And I have come to the same conclusion. I am tired of the empty honours of mistress; there is no satisfaction in keeping house with an empty purse, in having to make excuses to the butcher and baker and grocer, and in looking after servants who are always wanting their wages. I don't believe she would take advantage of her position to be unkind to us, and I am sure poor papa does want some one to look after him. It is of no use *our* trying to please him! I thought I should hate the idea of a stepmother, but I don't know but what it would be better for us. And the only woman in the world I could bring my mind to tolerate is *Meliora*. I wonder if such a notion has ever entered into papa's head?"

"I fancy it has; but he could not speak to her just at present. And yet, I don't think he is in love with her, exactly."

"In love! No; of course not. Old people, like papa and *Meliora*, don't marry for love. Well, do you know, I wish it may happen; I'll give my consent. It would be good for us all, and, of course, it would be good for *Meliora*."

"I am not quite so sure of that. She would take a terrible burden upon herself; and I cannot see that she would be much of a gainer. She would be a married woman instead of an old maid, and that of course counts for something. And she would be the Rector's wife, and go in to dinner everywhere after Lady Anna Barham; but I am almost certain she cares very little about that sort of thing. It strikes me she does not even care to be married!"

"Oh, no woman remains an old maid from choice, and Meliora's chances now must be few, naturally; she cannot be far short of forty."

"And papa is fifty-six! It will do very well. Only, you see, if the living is to be—what is it?—*sequestered*, what will there be for any of us to live upon? Now, Meliora has a little property of her own, enough to live on in a quiet way, I believe, and she can always command a high salary. I am afraid she will think she is better off as she is. And, really, any woman would think twice before accepting an elderly ruined man, with a scapegrace son, and six daughters—and two of them Netta and Brenda!"

Nevertheless, the girls hoped that Meliora might accept the responsibilities of which they were so sincerely weary, and take up the load they were so anxious to throw down. She was very much astonished at the greeting she received when, on the Thursday evening, she arrived, and found all the family assembled to receive her. Mr. Carisbroke and Lavinia met her at the gate, and Maggie was anxious that she should make a good tea after her long journey. Joan, of course, was delighted, but that was not remarkable; for the governess had done more for Joan than had both her parents put together, and she was more to Joan than the girl's mother had ever been. And then Ruby had to be exhibited, and two more teeth proudly displayed—two pearly little teeth that Meliora had never seen before!

"Well, Joan!" said Miss Martin, when they were alone together in the nursery, and Ruby fast asleep in her god-mother's arms,—“how have things gone on in my absence? I want to hear the news. Your letters were not very satisfactory; and when Maggie wrote, I thought she must

be in terribly low spirits. She intimated that the end of the world—that is, of *her* world—was at hand; it was a regular jeremiad, that funny scrawl of hers."

"Oh! everything has gone wretchedly since you went away, Meliora; and I am sure something dreadful is going to happen. Papa has had some terrible anxiety, I am sure; and it is about cash I should say, for he won't, or else he *can't*, give Lavinia any housekeeping money; and I spent my own last shillings in buying shoes and socks for dear little Ruby. I could not bear to see her in those worn-out things that were quite too small for her. And, do you remember that I asked you one day what 'sequestration' meant, and you told me to find out? And I did find out; and I am sadly afraid we are all going to find out, by sad experience, what it really is to be sequestered."

Meliora looked thoughtful; it was no new idea to her, though no hint of such a calamity had reached her. But she knew what must follow when a beneficed clergyman is declared a bankrupt; and there had been such a scarcity of money all the summer, and she had heard so many murmurs on all sides of long-standing accounts, and bills unpaid, that she was quite prepared to find Mr. Carisbroke in extremity. She began to think seriously of her own position at the Rectory. That the promised stipend of £100 per annum should still be paid seemed to be out of the question.

"Nevertheless," she said to herself, when she had wished Joan good-night, and put out the candle in Netta and Brenda's room, "I do not feel justified in deserting these people in their extremity. I can do without the money well enough; and I think, if they will have me, I shall stay, and try hard to do the work I came to do. And I *cannot* leave Joan—I love her—I never loved any pupil half so well. *She* wants *me*, too! I could almost believe that both Lavinia and Maggie were honestly glad to welcome me back again. Only Netta and Brenda did not seem pleased at my return; they naturally connect me with lessons and exercises—poor children! I sometimes wonder whether it is of any use to make them study, whether I am not wasting my time and theirs too, trying their tempers, and wearing out my own patience by thrusting

upon them French and music and pencil-drawing. If they were not so lazy, I should fancy they might be trained for the kitchen, for they like a little cooking for a change, and they quite enjoyed washing and ironing their pocket-handkerchiefs the other day. I am afraid, though, it was only the novelty of the thing. Soap-suds and flat-irons would be as much of a bore as Kalkbrenner's exercises and the auxiliary verbs, if they were insisted on once a week. I suppose I shall hear to-morrow a full, true, and particular account of all that is really impending. But *sequestration!* That is a bad business, indeed. I wonder how much remains of Mrs. Carisbroke's private fortune!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE RECTOR'S WOOING.

When duties unfulfilled remain,
Or noble works are left unplanned,
Or when great deeds cry out in vain,
Or coward heart and trembling hand—

Arouse him then :—this is thy part ;
Show him the claim, point out the need,
And nerve his arm and cheer his heart ;
Then stand aside, and say " God speed ! "

FRANCIS CARISBROKE had quite made up his mind that the best thing he could do would be to marry Meliora. He could bear his burdens alone no longer ; he wanted help, comfort and counsel ; he needed a stronger mind and a cleverer judgment than his own to enable him to discover what it behoved him to do, and what to leave undone. His children required a mother, his servants a mistress, himself a wife, who would be to him a faithful friend and help-meet, as well as an affectionate companion. If he searched the world over, he could not find a woman more

fitted to be to him all that he desired than Meliora Martin. And heaven had sent her to his door, and established her under his roof. She was not even to seek; he had only to put the momentous question, to receive her promise, and to be calmly and serenely happy. For, like most men at his time of life, he supposed that he had only to ask and to have; to propose, and to be *thankfully accepted*. That any woman, already enrolled in the contemned order of spinsters, should hesitate to enter upon the honourable estate of matrimony never once occurred to him; ladies of a certain age were always ready to be married, as he supposed; and doubtless Meliora would gladly, though in her own dignified style, signify her willingness to become at the right time Mrs. Carisbroke.

He had reason, too, to believe that his choice would not be disagreeable to his daughters. Lavinia and Maggie were both beginning to be frightened at the turn which family affairs were taking, and they would thankfully shift on to broader shoulders than their own the responsibilities which they had so heedlessly assumed, and so speedily deprecated as a weight too grievous to be borne. There had been almost feud between Lavinia and Maggie and their father during Meliora's absence. The girls had proved themselves thoroughly incompetent in every point of view; they had not, perhaps, done so very much worse than their mother before them; but the whole aspect of affairs was changed, and demands were made upon them to which they were in every way utterly unequal. A stronger hand was needed to hold the reins of government at Perrywood Rectory; a firmer will and a farther-sighted policy were called for at this juncture, if the annals of the Carisbrokes were not immediately to terminate in dark despair and sad obscurity.

No! Lavinia and Margaret would not object, he felt assured, although, for mere form's sake, they, perhaps, might make some kind of feeble protest; the twins, of course, were not to be considered, and the step their father proposed to take would be unquestionably for their benefit. As for Joan, Meliora was her mother already. "Poor Louisa" had given her birth, certainly, and that was about all the child had to thank her for; Meliora had awoke in

her the soul that slumbered and taught her to *live*—not dream—the life that God had given her! And little Ruby would know no other maternal parent than her father's second wife. The more Francis Carisbroke considered his project, the more he liked it, the more praiseworthy his conduct appeared to himself, till at length he began to applaud and magnify the unselfish self-devotion which led him to contract a second marriage purely for the sake of his family.

And so a few days passed by, and Meliora was once more settled down to her manifold duties at the Rectory. It was no longer pretended that her sole sphere was the schoolroom; scarcely an hour passed in which somebody did not come to ask her advice, in which some difficulty was not submitted to her judgment, some problem brought to her to solve. And after all, she had less to do with her pupils than with family matters, for it was perfectly useless to force upon the twins anything beyond the merest rudiments of education; and Joan studied very well by herself, needing only partial supervision. Lavinia still kept the keys, but Meliora was free of the whole house, especially of the barely-supplied store-room and the linen-presses; and the servants as often applied to her as to Miss Carisbroke. Aunt Jane wrote to say she meant to prolong her visit into the winter; she could not exactly tell them when she would return; they did not really want her at Perrywood Rectory now they had Miss Martin among them again; and Cousin Robert's wife was an invalid, and not likely to be downstairs for some months to come, and the children were delicate, and their old nurse was dead, and the invaluable governess gone away to be married. In short, there was no reason why she should not comply with Cousin Robert's earnest entreaties, and remain for an indefinite period at Loch Side; and would the girls kindly pack up and forward sundry properties of hers, which she required immediately, and of which she furnished a list. Her brother read her letter twice over, and was not altogether displeased at the course she took, although he muttered something about deserting a fallen house, and making a new nest for herself before the old one came to pieces.

It was a bright October morning, and the Rector was tidying up the mignonette-beds beyond the lawn, when he saw Meliora come out into the porch with a handful of crumbs for the birds. He was rather tired of stooping—there was no regular gardener now—and he suddenly resolved to go at once and know his fate. Louisa had been dead more than nine months, and should the conversation terminate in an engagement, it need not be known beyond the family circle. Of course, marriage was not to be thought of till the full year of mourning was accomplished. Mr. Carisbroke was not the man to commit an impropriety, nor was Meliora likely to countenance proceedings which would be sure to expose her to social criticism. As he crossed the lawn, she came forward to meet him. He hoped the movement might be propitious, signifying that she would, in her own calm, composed style, gracefully meet him half way. She was shading her eyes with her hand, for the sun shone on her face. What a shapely hand it was! Not small by any means, but firm and smooth and white—a hand fitted to hold the woman's royal sceptre of household rule; a hand that if it once clasped yours would never fail you while life lasted; a hand such as never belonged to a cold-hearted, small-minded, self-centred, finical, fine lady.

There is as much character in hands as in tones and features; and *palmistry* is a true science, after all, though not precisely as it is understood by the fortune-tellers. Few are the past-masters in deceit who do not betray their real nature in the common hand-shake of daily intercourse. Meliora's hands and hand-clasp were quite in keeping with herself.

"I want to ask if you have any objection to Netta and Brenda cutting a few flowers in the south borders?" said she, when they met upon the leaf-strewn sward. "They have set their hearts on arranging some bouquets in the great majolica bowl, and I am always glad that they should undertake anything; but I thought I remembered something about those plots being forbidden ground."

"Oh, yes; that was in the summer. It does not matter now, for all the choice specimens are gone. Let them have their will; it is something that they should interest

themselves at all. I will go and tell them—I see them yonder with their baskets, under the old mulberry-tree.”

“Do not trouble yourself, Mr. Carisbroke; I am in no hurry.”

“So much the better for me, for I want to have some conversation with you. Could you give me a quarter of an hour in the library?”

“Certainly; Netta and Brenda are busy, as you see, and Joan is in the nursery. I will just speak to the children, and then I am at your service.”

He watched her as she went quickly down the garden-walk, and admired her firm, elastic tread as much as he had before admired her shapely hands; she stepped like one who would never be a laggard in life's race, never loiter when called to action by the voice of duty. He was fast falling in love with Meliora, and wondering what might have been his career had he married her twenty years ago, when he was still young, and fancied he saw his life before him. Francis Carisbroke was one of those men who always think they might have done so much more in this world had the circumstances of their lot only been otherwise than they really were.

In a few minutes he was in the library, and Meliora was sitting calmly before him, awaiting his pleasure. Had she shown the least sign of consciousness, he would have felt encouraged; he would have been relieved from the awkwardness, almost amounting to bashfulness, which suddenly possessed him, and deprived him of his native power of ready language. But there she sat, in her usual self-contained fashion, her face bright yet serene, her calm eyes looking straight into his, all unsuspecting of his coming words; ready to listen and to answer, to discuss whatever subject he might introduce. Truth to tell, she thought it just possible he had asked for this interview, in order to tell her that for the future he was obliged, unwillingly, to dispense with her services as his daughters' governess, and his visible hesitation confirmed her in this conjecture. She had already settled with herself what she would say to him in such case. She would tell him plainly that she was deeply interested in his children, particularly in Joan, who had become very dear to her; that salary was

no actual consideration, as she had a small settled income of her own, which had increased largely during the years she had spent as resident governess; that till matters changed for the better, she would be entirely content with a *home* at Perrywood Rectory, and a place of trust in the family circle. Very far was she from apprehending what really awaited her. She began to wonder, however, why the Rector, usually so ready of speech, should appear so curiously embarrassed, and find so much apparent difficulty in commencing his discourse.

At last he began. "I hope, Miss Martin"—he sometimes called her *Meliora*, and sometimes by her formal appellation—"I hope you are quite happy at Perrywood?"

"I think I am," she replied, tranquilly. "I find myself useful here. Joan and I are very fond of each other; little Ruby wants to come to me whenever she sees me; Lavinia and Maggie are much kinder to me than they were formerly."

"They ought to be, they ought to be!" hastily rejoined Mr. Carisbroke. "They owe so much to you, we all do, indeed—myself, especially."

"I am very glad if I have been of service—if I have been in any way a comfort, and I see no reason why we should make a change. Only I was thinking—you have spoken to me so openly and freely about your present pecuniary difficulties, that I trust I shall not displease you by what I am going to say. *May* I take somewhat of a liberty?"

"Say what you like; nothing can be a liberty on your part, I think so very highly of you in every way, and I am so sure that all you say, as all you do, is for the best! Besides, you are entirely one of ourselves."

"It is very good of you so to meet me half-way. It is this, Mr. Carisbroke: as a member of your family, simply as such, will you let me remain till better days arrive? Will you let the question of salary be suspended? I do not require at present any addition to my income. I think I made you understand when first we treated together that I taught for the pure love of teaching, and not for mere gain; certainly not for a living, as I have always had a sufficient income for my own modest requirements; and as

I have not touched it since my governess-life began, but, on the contrary, added to it from year to year, I need scarcely say it has considerably accumulated; so that out of my own private resources I can take all that I require, and feel none the poorer, without adding to your anxieties. When fortune smiles once more on you, as I trust she will, you can pay off old scores if you please, or you can leave them alone, as suits you best. Till the clouds give place to the sunshine, this arrangement may suffice; shall it be so?"

He became rather pale, as he replied, "Meliora, I can scarcely find words to express my admiration of your generosity. Your proposal is like yourself—noble, simple-minded, magnanimous. I am not offended. No, indeed! how *could* I be! But I am deeply touched; no woman has ever treated me with so much pure, frank kindness and consideration."

"You consent, then, to this arrangement, which I need not say is entirely between ourselves?—not even my near relatives will share the secret."

"I should consent with gratitude, and without false shame, to accept so much at your hands, if I had not also a proposal to make, if I had not already thought of other arrangements, which I hope—which I earnestly hope—may prove as acceptable to yourself, as they will be to me, should you be propitious. Meliora, will you be my wife?"

"Certainly *not*, Mr. Carisbroke."

"Now it is my turn to beg you not to be offended! You are thinking how short a time it is since my poor Louisa left me—little Ruby is only just over nine months old. I need not say that I only ask your *consent* now; I should not presume to speak of marriage till such time as I could do so without provoking the world's censure. With you I could—I should—commence a new life, enter on a new career!"

"Would that be possible, Mr. Carisbroke? I think not. Forgive me if I speak quite plainly and in terms that may sound slightly discourteous; but it seems to me that you are too old, far too old, to change your whole life—to begin, as you say, afresh."

"You can make anything you please of me, Meliora."

"You deceive yourself; I am quite sure that I cannot, nor will I make the endeavour."

"Why will you not? I could make you happy, I believe."

"We can both be happier under the old relationship, as Mr. Carisbroke and Miss Martin. Why will I not marry you? For the best and most sufficient reason—I *do not love you.*"

"Could you not learn to love me?"

"No, I could not. Except in friendly, sisterly fashion, just as I might have loved you, in all simplicity and pureness of heart, had Mrs. Carisbroke been still living. Nor do I, for a moment, imagine you love me; it is impossible."

"I do love you, Meliora. It has dawned upon me lately—very lately, I own—that I love you as I never loved before; you will add much to my misery if you refuse my prayer. I shall think that I am indeed the most unfortunate, heaven-deserted man."

"Mr. Carisbroke, I am very sorry—nay, I am deeply grieved—at this. You will, I am sure, believe me when I say that I had not the remotest idea of such a proposal being imminent when you asked for a private interview. Had I dreamed of what you intended to say, I should not have afforded you the opportunity. For it is only a mood that possesses you—an impulse which has seized you; and when mood and impulse have passed, you will not regret my reply."

"But I shall—I shall! I shall regret it to my dying day. And yet, how could I hope that it would be otherwise? It is presumptuous in me to ask you to link your fortunes with mine; to share—not my palmy days, but my adverse ones; to accept me as I am—no longer young, no longer hopeful, but falling fast into the sere and yellow leaf!"

"If I loved you—as a woman *should* love a man whom she takes 'for better, for worse,'—the circumstances to which you allude would not deter me. But though my youth is past, though I have very little romance in my character, though I am what people stigmatise as 'a

strong-minded woman !'—I cannot, *dare* not marry you without a deep and tender sentiment, which I am very far from experiencing. Indeed, Mr. Carisbroke, apart from my own feelings, I would not do you so great a wrong as to become your wife without one throb of wife-like affection. I should wrong you greatly, and I should wrong your children."

"Nay; my children would not be displeased. And if they were, I need not ask their consent to my second marriage; I never heard that such a step was necessary, or even expedient. *You* would never play the harsh, unnatural step-mother !"

"I hope not; but I would not trust myself too far. On one point I am most fully convinced. There is only one thing that can justify any woman in becoming a step-mother; and that is—other circumstances being, of course, equal—an unmistakeable, fervent love for the man who is their father. No, Mr. Carisbroke; at the risk of paining you by my bluntness, I say again I do not love you, and therefore I dare not, *will not*, assume the sacred position of mother to the children of your late wife. Do not urge me, I entreat you."

"I cannot accept your decision as final. I cannot bear at once to relinquish the hope I have cherished—how fondly, I did not till this moment guess! At least you will take time to consider my proposal. Do not give me your real answer *now*—I am content to wait for it till to-morrow, till next week, till any time you choose to mention! Shall it be so, then?"

"I think not. It would be mere coquetry on my part to accede to your request, for my answer would be a month hence what it is at this moment. If I could have cared for you, I would have told you so; I would not trifle with you for the world. It is because I am so perfectly assured of my own feelings that I speak so plainly, and with such entire unreserve. I cannot be your wife. I decline the honour."

"Nay, now you are jesting. The honour would be mine."

"I was—I am—quite serious; I mean what I say, in all honesty. A proposal of marriage from a good, up-

right-minded man is always an honour. You have done me the highest honour any man can do any woman; Your proposal proves that you prefer me before all other women in the world—that you have the utmost confidence in my prudence and integrity; that you do not fear to commit to me your reputation, your fortunes, your happiness—not to speak of your children, who must be dearer to you than aught on earth. Nevertheless, I cannot accept your offer. Pray receive this as final.”

“One word, Meliora—is there any other attachment?”

“None. I am not a marrying person. I am wedded to my vocation; I need no other. But it may perhaps comfort you to know that I should return the same answer that I have given you, to the worthiest, noblest, wealthiest, most prince-like man the world contains, and for the same reason—the lack of love. Many years ago, before the death of my parents, I, as novelists say, met my fate. I loved and was beloved. It was not the will of God that John Ormond and I should marry. I need not tell you how things fell out; even now, after the lapse of years, I could not go over *that* story! It is enough that we were separated—that after a while I heard of his death in a foreign land. All the love I ever had to give was his. Long ago I decided that I would never marry.”

“I understand. But I do not ask for the ardent love you gave that favoured young man. I shall be perfectly contented with a quiet, steady attachment, such as may well subsist between a man of my age and a woman of yours, both having, more or less, left our lives behind us.”

“And can you not be content with such an attachment, apart from marriage? I cannot tell you how sorry I am that such an idea has occurred to you! Let us forget it; let us go on as before. I offer you my most sincere friendship, it is all I have to give! A very short time hence, and you will thank me, I feel sure, that I have not taken you at your word.”

“You will not leave us, then?”

“Not if you will take my answer as final, and simply regard me as the sisterly friend I wish to be to you. If I had not a very true regard for you, if I did not trust you

fully, or if I had less affection for Joan and little Ruby, I should certainly make instant arrangements for seeking another home. If you really *love* me, you will best show it by returning to the old position; by giving up all thought of my ever being more to you than I am at this moment; by helping me, as I desire to help you, in the training and welfare of the children. But perhaps you would rather I left you? my presence here may possibly be a vexation, after what has just now passed?"

"If you left me, I should be desolate indeed. Since I may plead my cause no further, be assured that I accept with the utmost gratitude your *friendship*; which I know is worth far more than the professed love of the majority of women. Ah, *Meliora*, if I had but known you earlier!"

"It is best as it is. For I believe that all these things are '*ordered*.' God, who rules our destinies, is all-wise, and knows what is really for our good. My dear friend, let us trust Him, and wait for the daylight. He will show us what ought to be done as regards your affairs, and concerning the dear children."

"I could bear all my troubles better, if I did not feel that they are more of my own creation than of God's rendering. In the first place, I had no right to become a clergyman—I took holy orders for selfish and mercenary ends; in the same spirit I married my poor Louisa; and in the same spirit I have lived on, consulting my own ease, gratifying my own capricious tastes, never reflecting that there must come a day of reckoning, both as regards this world and the next. I fear me, it is too late to redeem the past."

"Oh, no; never too late! To see and to confess one's error is the first step towards amendment. We cannot retrace our steps; we can but ask that henceforth they may be guided onward and heavenward."

"I have indeed gone my own way, and been very foolish. And I am punished; even you do not know how heavily! And my poor children must suffer for my sinful follies! It is little that I cannot accuse myself of flagrant errors of conduct; I had no temptations to sins that disgrace a man in the eyes of society, no leaning

towards a career of vice ; but I gave myself up to a life of sloth and luxury, and I indulged my every wish, and lived beyond my income, year after year, till, at last—the end has come. My history may be summed up in one single sentence—an *unprofitable servant* ! And you know what the Lord Himself has said of such cumberers of the ground.”

CHAPTER X.

THE CHURCHWARDEN.

“Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

“*MELIORA* !” said Lavinia, a day or two after the memorable interview in the library, “I do believe papa has asked you to marry him, and you have refused !”

“What makes you think so, Lavinia ?”

“Several things : he looks gloomier than ever, and is crosser than I have ever known him ; also there is a certain awkwardness between you that did not exist a week ago. From a word papa let drop, too, I am quite convinced that you have been behaving badly to him.”

“Behaving badly ! No, Lavinia, I think I may deny that allegation. Supposing I have refused to become the second Mrs. Carisbroke—*supposing* it, I say !—what then ? Was I bound to marry your father simply because he asked me ?”

“You are not likely, at your age, and in your position, to have a better offer, I fancy.”

“Perhaps not. It is not quite polite of you to remind me of ‘my age,’ though it does not in the least disconcert me. I am not ashamed to confess the number of years which the Lord my God has spared me to live and work upon His earth—I shall be forty next birthday ; I completed my thirty-ninth year only last week.”

"Oh, why did you not let us know? We could have made you birthday presents."

"I am too old for birthday-keeping. But that is not to the point; I am going on to remark that I neither expect nor desire to receive any more offers of marriage. I wish to remain single to the end of my days. I think I speak advisedly when I say that the man does not exist who would tempt me to surrender my freedom."

"What an odd notion! And you are not at all bad-looking, Meliora, and might pass for thirty-five if you liked."

"Thank you, Lavinia, for the compliment, though rather curiously expressed; but I cannot perceive the exact connection of ideas."

"Oh, you are so logical, or metaphysical, or whatever you call it, and you are making Joan as philosophical as yourself. I expect Ruby will talk like the Queen of Sheba as soon as ever she begins to speak! Can't you see, your good looks ought to have got you a husband long ago? And even now you might secure one, I am certain. I'll tell you what, Meliora, if papa has really proposed to you, and you have refused him, I think you are just tempting Providence."

"In what way, my dear?"

"You won't take the good Providence places within your reach. Did you ever hear of the maiden who went through the wood, and through the wood, and picked up a crooked stick at last?"

"Yes, Lavinia, I listened to the expounding of that ancient parable before you were born; but then, my dear, the young lady in question was *looking* for a stick to lean upon, I suppose; and in her self-conceit and vanity failed to find one worthy of her adoption, till coming to the borders of the wood for the last time, she snatched up the first cudgel that lay in her way, and found, *par conséquence*, that she had made an extremely sorry choice!"

"Just so; and are you not following her example?"

"By no means. I am not looking for a 'stick,' *alias* a lover; I prefer to depend upon my own capabilities. I shall not pick up a support of any kind, good, bad, or indifferent. No, Lavinia, I cannot apply your parable to myself."

"You are so dreadfully strong-minded."

"Would you have liked a strong-minded step-mother?"

"That I should, if her strength of mind would have put matters straight again. Oh, Meliora, I do wish you would have married papa! I know he asked you. Confess, now!"

"It is a question you have no right to ask me. No honourable woman tells the story of her rejected suitors."

"Ah! but this is altogether different. Papa did not fall in love with you, of course; he only thought it would be good for all parties if you became his wife. And I think so, too, and so does Maggie. If you have refused on our account, Meliora, it is very foolish of you. Understand once for all, that we, the elder daughters, give our unfeigned consent to the match."

"Thank you, my dear, for your kind opinion of me. But I assure you, that if I had loved your father—if I had felt that I could presently love him, as every wife should love her husband—I should have agreed to marry him without consulting either you or Margaret. I should have allowed nothing but absolute duty to come between us—even as, *not* loving him, I allow no persuasions, no apparent expediency to bring us together."

"Oh, then, he *has* asked you! I knew he had; and I will tell you why! I overheard him saying something to Joan this morning, which, at first, I could not understand, but which was soon explained when I began afterwards to question Joan. She admitted that you might have been Mrs. Carisbroke, or, as she put it, her own 'dear mother!' And it is so! is it not?"

"If, indeed, your father has spoken of what has passed between us, I also may speak. Yes, Lavinia, your father did me the honour of asking me to become his wife, after the proper interval of mourning for your mother had expired; he told me, also, that he was sure you and your sisters would receive me kindly. But I would not wrong him by taking what he offered, knowing that I had no wifely affection to bestow. And to end all, Lavinia—for I know you will not rest till you have found out everything—to save you the trouble of making further inquiries, I will tell you candidly *why* I had no love to give your father,

or any other man. There was once *some one*—it is almost twenty years ago—to whom I gave all my woman's heart. It was not God's will that we should marry; he died long ago. That is my story."

"Tell me all about it, do! It is something to listen to, a real love story."

"No, Lavinia, I can tell you no more. I have told you the facts, and that must suffice. Even so much has not passed my lips for years till the other day. I said to your father what I have now said to you. I could as soon talk to you about that long-buried sacred past as I could speak my soul's secrets out on yonder village-green."

"Nearly twenty years! And you have been faithful all that while to a *memory*! *Meliora*, I don't know whether to admire or to despise you most!"

"It makes little difference to me, my dear. There are certain places in one's heart which neither the world's scorn nor its praises can reach. Constancy is scarcely a virtue on my part, because it is an inherent part of my nature. But you will now comprehend, Lavinia, how impossible for me is marriage with your father, or with any man alive, however great and good."

"Indeed, I don't understand. I would marry any tolerable sort of man rather than be an old maid."

"Lavinia, do you know that you are absolutely *vulgar*? If I spoke out my mind quite freely, I should use a stronger term. Anything coarser than the sentiment you have just uttered, I cannot imagine proceeding from the lips of a young woman brought up respectably. I only hope that you speak heedlessly—that as you grow older you will change your mind."

"Come, *Meliora*, don't be starchy! I don't want to quarrel with you, for I am sure you mean well by all of us. Of course, I did not mean I would marry *any one* just for the sake of the matronly prefix. Of course, I would not marry a tradesman, or an office clerk, or a person of that sort; I would prefer being a spinster like Aunt Jane—*she* might have married a retired grocer if she had chosen. Poor mamma told me all about it; but, being a Carisbroke, she naturally declined the *mésalliance*.

Papa would never have forgiven Aunt Jane if she had disgraced herself by such a connection, nor would any of her family ever have acknowledged her as Mrs. Sugarloaf."

"Aunt Jane might have been very happy with Mr. Sugarloaf, notwithstanding. It would all have depended upon the grocer himself; trade does not necessarily degrade or vulgarise either man or woman. I consider the prejudice entertained by persons of a certain class against their fellow-creatures who are engaged in business, and without whom they could not live comfortably, as infinitely absurd and unchristianlike. A year or two ago I met with a fine lady who actually objected to a certain pew in church, though it was the only one obtainable at the time, simply because it was already occupied—a part of it, that is—by her *poulterer* and his wife and two daughters! She absolutely refused to praise and to pray to her Maker in company with 'one of my own tradespeople,' as she expressed it."

"And would *you* not object to sitting in the same pew with your butcher or poulterer?"

"It would depend. I should object very much if I owed the butcher or poulterer a long-standing *bill*. I should be haunted by the ghosts of chops and legs of mutton and chickens that I had eaten at my fellow-worshipper's expense, and my conscience would be pricked continually. It would depend, too, upon the manners and habits of the good folk, as it would upon the behaviour of others of whatsoever degree. I would much prefer to sit and hear a sermon in company with a serious, well-conducted butcheress, to sharing my pew with a lackadaisical fine lady, whose name might be in the peerage, for all she interfered with my devotions by the rustling of her silks, and the jangle of her ornaments, and the play of her diamond rings, and even annoyed me by general irreverence of deportment."

"Oh, dear, *Meliora*, how you do expatiate about things! Let us come back to our muttons, if you please. I told you that I intended to marry, and to marry *well*, if possible, but to marry, *anyhow*! And I meant it."

"I am sorry to hear it. I can only hope that you may

providentially be led to the person whom you will love and by whom you will be loved in return. And, my dear, may I ask you to be so kind as never to talk in this strain to your younger sisters?"

"Oh, I should not, of course, talk to babies, and Netta and Brenda are little more. As to Joan, she is becoming so *very*—what shall I call it?—*high-toned* is the right phrase, I imagine—that no worldly maxims of mine could possibly injure her. I do wonder what you will make of Joan! But, after what has happened, I suppose you will be leaving us, spite of your motherly devotion to her and to poor little Ruby. I must say I think you are extremely unkind, Meliora. If things were as they used to be in mamma's time it would not matter; but when everything is gone wrong, and papa doles out every shilling with an expostulation and a groan, and I am expected to housekeep on a miserable pittance, it is quite another matter. When you go, I shall throw up the situation altogether—'give in,' as the Americans say—and let the house keep itself as best it can."

"I am not going away, Lavinia."

"You are *not*? Well, now, I am surprised! I should have thought you of all people would have gone in for the strict proprieties."

"I hope I am not outraging any of the proprieties by remaining under the roof of a friend whom I believe I can serve. I am sorry that your papa has chosen to speak of what passed between us the other day, and I do entreat you to keep silence on the subject. If you talk, Lavinia, there will be gossip, and it might be of a kind that would drive me away. If you really wish to keep me here, you will not allow the secret to be disclosed. I am sure of Joan."

"And you are not sure of me?"

"Are you sure of yourself, my dear? I think your papa, overburdened as he is by anxieties, should not suffer from any imprudence of his own children. Do you really wish me to remain at Perrywood?"

"Do I wish the fire to burn on a winter's day! Do I want those horrible bills paid! Do I want to be fed and housed and comfortably clad! Of course I wish you to

remain, for, somehow, you seem to be all we have to hold to. If anybody in this world can pull us through our troubles you can. I know I felt very differently towards you once, but then I had no idea of the dreadful mess we were getting into. And you were only the governess, you see."

"And what am I now?"

"Our good genius—our very best friend! Oh, if you only *would* marry papa!"

"You have got a complete craze upon that subject, Lavinia. I could do nothing as Mrs. Carisbroke that I cannot do quite as effectually as Miss Martin. But I am sadly afraid, my dear girl, that you immensely overrate my powers. I would joyfully pull you through the troubles that are, and, worse still, those that threaten you—that threaten *us*, I will say, for I am resolved to throw in my lot with you if you will have it so. But how can this be done? I cannot coin money; I can only determine to take no more from you, and to make what you have go as far as possible. Ah! here is Joan; she may as well hear what we have to say."

And then followed a short conversation, in which a few things were explained, and it was agreed that the subject of the "declined proposals" should remain a dead secret between the three there assembled. Maggie was not to be enlightened, for even Lavinia admitted that she was not to be trusted with private matters, and Miss Carisbroke could well perceive that in such a case as the present gossip was extremely undesirable, inasmuch as it might easily become scandal, such as would drive even the strong-minded Meliora from her entrenchments.

"Well," said Lavinia, when at length they understood each other, "don't you think, after all, Joan, that it is unkind of Meliora to refuse to become our stepmother?"

"No, I don't," said Joan, decidedly. "Meliora likes papa, but she does not *love* him! Of course, I am too young to understand such things; but I can see plainly that this settles the question. Meliora is too good to marry without affection; she could not be so wicked."

"So wicked! So unromantic, you mean?"

"No; I mean what I said. For marriage without love

is wicked, I am sure. Yet I am sorry that she is not to be 'mamma.' "

"It will make no difference to you, Joan," said Meliora, pressing the girl's hand. "Since I cannot and must not be 'mamma,' suppose you take me for your eldest sister; or, if Lavinia objects to that, for 'auntie'?"

"I think I like best to call you 'Meliora.' You have been that to me, I know."

"Very well, so be it. And now, having settled this little business, let us be practical, and look *nos dragons* in the face."

"What is the use of facing disagreeables till one is obliged?" pouted Lavinia. "Do let us forget our troubles while we may. I am tired of this everlasting and vulgar theme of impecuniosity."

"Impecuniosity is a thing that most people tire of, whether in practice or in theory; but unfortunately it is not to be got quit of by mere avoidance. It will force itself upon its victims, more persistently and more cruelly, the longer it is ignored."

"I would frown it down if I could I am sure," sighed Lavinia. "I hate to be poor. There is nothing so detestable as poverty, especially poverty that succeeds to plenty."

"It is very trying, I must confess; but frowning will not be more efficacious than neglect, I am afraid, in the present instance. Poverty is too much like an armed man that has to be met and encountered, and dealt with hand to hand. And the first thing is to meet him face to face, and find out all about him."

"I don't think even papa knows exactly *how* poor he is!" whispered Joan. And Meliora felt that she spoke the truth. The unfortunate Francis Carisbroke, driven to extremities, and threatened with ruin and disgrace, did not by any means comprehend the full extent of his disaster. Year after year his difficulties had increased, his debts had multiplied; he had put off the evil day at all costs, yet still he could not believe in the utter hopelessness of his condition. Liabilities that he had well-nigh forgotten persistently asserted themselves; promises that had been staved off from time to time now clamoured

for fulfilment. One creditor conferred with another, and it was finally agreed on all hands that Francis Carisbroke, M.A., Clerk in Holy Orders, should forthwith be made *bankrupt*.

And bankruptcy such as his meant sequestration with a vengeance, for the income of many years would be required to put matters straight. As Mr. Carisbroke had private property in right of his deceased wife, it was not improbable that the entire proceeds of the living would be sequestered. He began to feel terribly forlorn and helpless, assured as he was that the tempest was close at hand; that the heavy clouds which for so many years had slowly and darkly gathered were about at last to descend in overwhelming floods; that the awful storm *must* come ere the blue sky and the sweet sunshine could reappear; if indeed they ever smiled again upon one who had so far passed the meridian of his age, and who had so shamefully wasted as fair an heritage as he himself had ever desired in the sunny days of youth and hope.

Mr. Selwyn, the curate, had been dismissed, and that with his year's stipend partly unpaid; the Rector had to work henceforth single-handed. The cruel torment of incessant duns, and ceaseless worries of one kind or another, drove him almost distracted. He could not study; even his most cherished editions failed to give him pleasure.

As he sat in his luxurious library, and gazed upon his well-filled shelves, he involuntarily began to calculate for how many of them his bookseller had given him credit, how few of them were his own *bonâ-fide* possessions. He was ashamed to go into his parish, he shrank from showing his face in Massington or Cotswoldbury, his sermons sounded in his own ears like sarcasms, his heart beat painfully, and his knees trembled as he ascended his pulpit stairs—those stairs which erewhile he had mounted with all the solemn dignity of his rectorial pride. When he met old friends he felt embarrassed; some of them, he thought, rather avoided him, or met him coldly and shyly; it was fast becoming a most painful ordeal to face his congregation on Sunday morning, so many of them were his creditors—his long-enduring creditors! And nearly

every adult person in the place knew of his desperate condition. Also, there was one other source of shame and misery, which no one, not even Meliora, guessed.

But the time soon came when she did guess, when she and Joan were afraid to look each other in the face, lest one should read the other's thoughts.

It was now November, but mild and pleasant for the season, and one fine Sunday morning, after service, Mr. Baxter, the churchwarden, instead of going home, as usual, to roast stalled ox and Yorkshire pudding—the standard Dominical fare of the family—left Mrs. Baxter and her boys and girls to pursue their way up the street alone, while he followed the Rector to his own garden gate. Maggie and Lavinia were already in the house, the twins were just in front on the gravel-walk, and Meliora and Joan were listening to something Mr. Carisbroke had to say about his favourite *Wistaria*, that still waved its leaflets greenly, and shook a pale lilac blossom or two against its sheltering north wall. They were all so occupied that they did not perceive Mr. Baxter's approach till the little gate swung to behind him, and he stood close to them.

"Good morning again," said the Rector, in the curious, hesitating tone which had lately grown upon him. "I am thinking it is time some of our choice plants were matted up for the season. This weather may change any day, any hour, and the frost will be sharp when it does come. These singularly mild autumns nearly always turn all of a sudden into icy winter. Haven't you noticed it?"

"Yes, oh yes!" replied Mr. Baxter, with the air of a preoccupied person. "Excuse my intruding, but I am going up to London to-morrow morning early, and shall not return till Wednesday night, and I wanted just to say that that adjourned committee-meeting *must* really take place this week. Will Thursday afternoon be convenient, sir?"

"Yes—no; that is, I am not sure," stammered Mr. Carisbroke. "I have an engagement one day this week—I am sure I don't just remember which day. Suppose we say *next* week, Mr. Baxter?"

"As you please, Mr. Carisbroke," was the reply, and

the significance of the churchwarden's tone at once attracted the attention of both Meliora and her pupil. "But really," he continued, "it will not do to have another postponement; we *must* balance those accounts, and as the subscriptions are not to go towards a *reredos*—everybody is against it, you see, and I think myself it is going a trifle too far in the direction of Rome! and since we are, after all, to be content with our old organ, it has been suggested that the money should *at once* be made available for the new schoolhouse. The School Committee met, you know, last Tuesday, and there was a select committee held privately on Friday night, and it was unanimously agreed that the funds collected for both *reredos* and organ should be forthwith expended on necessary repairs and improvements yonder"—pointing to a handsome building on the other side of the churchyard, and facing the village green—"the new warming apparatus does capitally, but it is not paid for, and it has cost a mint of money; and the additional class-rooms want fitting-up; and there's the—bless my soul, Mr. Carisbroke, how bad you do look!"

For the Rector shivered and turned ghastly pale, like a man who has just had a sudden and fearful shock. "It's the cold, I suppose," he said, faintly; "I ought not to stand still in the open air after preaching; I am not as young as I was, eh, Mr. Baxter!" and he laughed feebly, and shivered again, and gazed almost piteously at his churchwarden.

"I am very sorry I kept you here," replied Mr. Baxter, with a grave, inscrutable countenance; "but really, it's warm, positively warm, for the time of year, and the church, I thought, was rather chilly. Then shall we say to-morrow week? It must not be put off again, indeed it mustn't, Mr. Carisbroke! People will have their own way in these democratic times, you see, and the church-folk at Perrywood are as bad as Dissenters for getting to the bottom of things. Those accounts *must* be audited, and the money paid into the bank for speedy disbursement."

"Certainly, certainly," said the Rector, with another shiver, and a gasping of breath that quite alarmed the churchwarden.

"I'd have first-rate advice if I were you, Mr. Carisbroke," he said, as he turned back towards the churchyard; "I don't like your looks, I must tell you; and I thought you faltered rather in the second lesson, and again at the end of the Litany. Go up to town and consult some eminent physician, that's my advice. Good morning, ladies!"

That afternoon, when the sirloin and the Yorkshire pudding, and the walnuts and Ribston pippins had been duly discussed by the churchwarden and his family, there was a good deal of private talk between Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, and it was all about the Rector and his sudden indisposition. And Mr. Baxter's concluding words were, "Mark my words, Mary Ann, that there money is not forthcoming! it's no more in the bank than your gold watch is at this moment—and never was, I'll go bail. There's an unpleasant duty before me, I'm afraid—I don't want to be hard on his reverence—it must be an awful temptation to be in straits, as we *know* he is, and have the handling of public funds; but I'm churchwarden, and must do my duty."

"Surely you must do your duty, my dear," replied his wife; "in all the years we've been married I've never known Samuel Baxter *not* to do his duty! and it would do those young ladies good to have their un-Christian pride brought down a bit."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES.

I know not how to tell thee!
Shame rises in my face, and interrupts
The story of my tongue.

MANY, many years afterwards, when Joan Carisbroke was almost alone in the world, she remembered that fatal Sunday in November. On that day, as it seemed to her, the first volume of her life came to a conclusion, for she left her childhood, her innocent, careless girlhood, far behind her, and stood forth a woman grown, in soul if not in stature.

She followed her sisters into the house, not lingering as usual near Meliora, and she went up to her room, and shut and bolted the door of communication with the chamber of Netta and Brenda. Mechanically she took off her hat and mantle; mechanically she smoothed and straightened her gloves, as Meliora had taught her to do; and mechanically she stood before her little mirror, and brushed back the straggling hairs which the light breeze had blown about her face. And then she started, for in the looking-glass she saw a pale, scared girl, that could scarcely be recognised for Joan Carisbroke.

"It is terrible," she said to herself—"terrible, oh, so terrible! What a wretch I must be, though, to accuse my own father of—of——. No, no! it is all my own monstrous fancy; papa would never—never do *that*! If he did, he could not possibly, would not dare to, read the commandments every Sunday. And yet, what does it all mean? Why did Meliora turn so scarlet, and then so white? Why did she tremble and put down her veil as she came into the hall? Had she, too, got a chill? Well, I seem to have one myself; my teeth would chatter if I let them, and my hand shakes; have we all got ague, I wonder? Ah! there is the second bell; however shall we get through dinner?"

It was easier than might have been supposed for Mr.

Carisbroke declined to come to table. He had no appetite, he said, and he would remain quietly in the library; Lavinia might bring him a biscuit and a little hot brandy and water.

"I am regularly frightened about papa," said Miss Carisbroke, when she returned to the dining-room. "Meliora, will you take his place? I never can carve a fowl respectably. What do you think is the matter with him?"

"I cannot say, indeed. Netta, leave off crumbling your bread; it is wasteful as well as untidy. And, Brenda, I wish you would not twist your napkin into a rope. It looks already as if it had been in use for a week!"

The twins silently though sullenly ceased their idle occupations. They had learned to obey quietly, since they were no longer encouraged to make protests and excuse themselves. There was no parlourmaid at Perrywood Rectory now; the girls and Meliora waited upon themselves and each other. One thing might have been noticed had either of the elder daughters possessed the smallest portion of that "sixth sense," which comes of acute perceptions, and being always wide-awake to passing events. Joan and Meliora pertinaciously avoided each other's eyes, and seemed quite absorbed, the one in carving, the other in inspecting the contents of her plate.

"Meliora, don't look like that!" said Lavinia, at last. "What are you doing? You are heaping your plate with potatoes! I believe you are dreaming; and it is not at all like yourself. Oh, you are welcome to a whole dishful of potatoes, only you will never eat them, and they seem to me not particularly well cooked. Something has happened; what is it?"

"Nothing has happened that I am aware of; but I am afraid Mr. Carisbroke is seriously unwell."

"So am I. He looks so strange, and won't answer one. It is some sort of attack, I am sure. Don't you think we had better send for Dr. Ingledew?"

"Your papa might not like it. Men are always annoyed when too much notice is taken of their ailments."

"But suppose it is some sort of stroke, or, worse still, heart disease? I have heard him say grandpapa had something wrong with his heart, and would probably have died of it if he had not been carried off by something else."

"I do not think we need apprehend either illness just now. He will rally presently. Quiet and rest are what he needs most and *warmth*."

"He is sitting by a splendid fire, and I made his grog both hot and strong; he doesn't like it sweet. And I really want a glass of wine myself. I feel all fluttered. How can you always drink water, Meliora?"

"I prefer it; I have never taken anything else, except once or twice as medicine. But if you are going to have some port, Lavinia, just give Joan half a glass, will you? I am sure she is not quite well this morning."

Then Joan knew that Meliora had seen the change which had come over her since leaving the church porch. She took the wine silently and drank it, thinking what horrible, nauseous stuff it was. But the twins demanded each their glass of wine, for the others had passed the decanter, and it used to be "share and share alike" under the old administration.

"We always had our glass of wine on Sundays, and very often on other days, when poor mamma was alive," observed Brenda, plaintively.

"We always had our glass of wine when poor mamma was alive," chimed in the echo.

Lavinia glanced at Meliora, who was silent, though her look seemed to say, "Let them have what they will to-day!" And so the glasses of the young ladies were filled to their intense satisfaction. Dinner was over at last, and the twins were left to revel in the dessert, for there were plenty of apples and pears and cob-nuts in the fruit-room, and there was damson cheese and apricot marmalade at discretion. Joan, as usual, went up to the nursery; she always had little Ruby to herself on Sunday afternoons.

"Ah, my little Ruby! my bonnie treasure!" she whispered to the laughing, crowing child, who clutched at her braided hair, and shrieked with infantile delight; "will

you ever be heavy-hearted? Will you ever feel as if all of a sudden the sun had gone down, and black mists covered all the prospect? I think I know now how people are affected when a thunderbolt falls at their feet, killing, not themselves, but something else that is a very part of their light or life! My Ruby, is your Joan very, very wicked, to have such thoughts? Ah, if I am wrong—God grant I may be wrong!—I will punish myself very severely; I will humble myself to the dust. How I shall rejoice when I come to myself, and find that I have been under a shameful delusion; that with this poverty of ours, that is beginning to press so heavily upon us, is mingled no dishonour. And yet—and yet that can scarcely be, for *debt*, such debt as ours, must always be disgraceful. Only, all that will seem as nothing, if this fearful nightmare will but pass away. Oh, papa, papa! Poor papa! What you must have suffered, and what misery is still before you! I would scorn the wretched suspicion, and proclaim myself a wretch, if it were not that I see—I *know* Meliora feels exactly as I do at this moment. And Mr. Baxter is as sure as he can be that—that—those horrible accounts are not in a fit state to be examined.”

And here she was interrupted by little Ruby, who burst into passionate crying, half vexed at being so little noticed, half frightened at Joan's grave, saddened face, so she had to laugh and talk baby-nonsense, and play bo-peep for the rest of the afternoon; and, oh! what a slow, wearisome afternoon it was! How long the hours before the nurse-maid returned from her walk, and there was the welcome summons to the tea-table.

Mr. Carisbroke had joined his family, and was drinking tea by the fire. Lavinia wanted to send to a young clergyman whom she knew, and beseech him to take the evening service. But the Rector refused to ask assistance. He was certainly looking better than at dinner-time, and though he wore a burdened, preoccupied aspect, he was not so very pale, and there was some animation in his eyes, as he addressed his daughter: “No, no! my dear! I do not want any help, I assure you; I am quite fit to do duty. I am very much better. I fancy it was a sort of bilious attack. Biliousness takes so many forms, doesn't it,

Meliora? Our livers are the plague of our lives! Joan, my child, you are looking far from well."

"I have the headache, papa. It has been aching ever since I came home from church."

"Ah! and so has mine. I believe this unseasonable weather is extremely trying; it is more like July than November as far as the temperature is concerned."

"Why, papa," exclaimed Maggie, "you were complaining of the cold not an hour ago! And I must confess I feel uncomfortably chilly. We really *must* have new winter cloaks before next Sunday."

"There will be no new cloaks for anybody," said Mr. Carisbroke, gloomily; "you will have to do with your old one, Maggie; I dare say it is in very good condition."

"Indeed, it is not, papa! Ask Meliora. It is as shabby as shabby! I wouldn't go to church in it for *worlds*. I'd rather be frozen, or stop in Sunday after Sunday, than make my appearance in that old, dowdy thing, that never did become me! Why, the crape is all rusty and cockled, and——"

"There, there, Maggie, that will do," interrupted her father irritably. "This is very unsuitable conversation for Sunday afternoon; you think quite too much of dress. Only understand, once for all—you and your sisters—all of us, indeed, that we must make the best of what we have, and be thankful."

And Mr. Carisbroke rose hastily from his chair, returned his cup to the tray, and walked off to his own sanctum, saying, as he did so, "I want to speak to you, Meliora, for a minute, when you have quite finished your tea."

"Very well," replied Meliora, in a constrained voice, not daring to lift her eyes to his. She might have been the presumed guilty person whose accounts were unrepresentable, so deep was her sense of the hovering shame and misery about her. She followed him, however, into the library, and closed the door behind her. "Can I do anything for you?" was her simple question, when some moments had elapsed, and he still kept silence.

"I want some homœopathic medicine," was the unexpected rejoinder.

"For what?" asked Meliora, shortly; "for headache?"

"No; for *nerves*! Haven't you something that quiets one's brain, and calms one down, and gives one artificial strength? I dare not drink any more brandy, and ether and chlorodyne always make me stupid or half-delirious."

"All three are poisons in your present state, and I am almost afraid I have nothing in my medicine chest that will serve your turn."

"A draught of Lethe would be the best remedy, if one could only get it; or, better still——"

"What?"

"A draught of something that would put one into the sleep that knows no waking."

"There is no such sleep, Mr. Carisbroke. *That* sleep which we commonly call death is but a closing of the mortal eyelids; the soul, if it sleeps at all, which I don't believe, must soon awake, and in the presence of its God. But pray do not talk so wildly; you are not fit for this evening's duty, and there is still plenty of time to run over to the Grange. Let me go; I can explain matters better than one of the servants."

"No, no; I can get through! I must be at my post to-night. Perhaps it may be the last time—the last time. Meliora! I wish I could go mad!"

"I do not know what to say to you," she said, softly, after a moment's pause; "I will not affect ignorance of your meaning; you are ill, but your illness arises from causes—rather, I should say, from *a cause*—which it would be very painful to discuss."

"Painful! It is *torture*; but there is no escape from the rack of mental agony, and it must be borne till mind and body alike give way. Why don't you renounce me, Meliora? I think it would do me good if you called me by the dreadful name I have lived to merit; I think it would be a relief if you reviled me as the wretch I am. Why don't you turn away in loathing and disdain, good, upright, virtuous woman that you are?"

"Because I elected to be your *friend*, Francis Carisbroke; and a friend, if she be worthy of the name, must be faithful even unto death."

"Faithful to a traitor—to a liar—a——"

"Hush! calling yourself bad names does not mend matters, and it pains me. Besides, we must not talk this matter over now; unless, indeed, you will allow me to rush at once to the Grange, in search of Mr. Holliday? I fear lest you should break down."

"I shall not! I can get through my task. Is there nothing you can give me, no soothing dose? I thought homœopathy was equal to every situation, any emergency!"

"I wish it were. Alas! there is no '*pathy*' under the sun that can minister to a mind diseased, as yours must be. But I will give you some *Ignatia*; that may help you for the time; it will at least quiet the nervous system. Is your sermon all ready?"

"Yes, but I shall not attempt to deliver it. I have looked out an old one. My text for to-night was to have been—'Well done, good and faithful servant!' How can I dare to stand up and preach from *that*?"

"And what is the text of the sermon you have chosen?"

"It is 'God be merciful to *me*—a sinner!'"

"Oh, Mr. Carisbroke, how could you go so far astray? How fair a lot yours has been! How goodly your heritage!"

"I know it! I know it! Don't reproach me, Meliora. I can't bear it from you just yet. If it had been revealed to me two years ago that I should so have fallen, I should have risen in holy indignation, and have cried from my inmost soul, 'Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?' I cannot tell you how I scorn and loathe myself." And the unhappy man bowed his head on his hands, and wept like a penitent child.

"You must not give way now, if you are to go into yonder church presently," said Meliora, as coldly as she could; she dare not express the sympathy she really felt for the miserable sinner, because she perceived that gentle and tender words just now were more than he could bear. And it was too late by this time to summon the Grange's clerical inmate—already the bells were beginning their sweet Sabbath evening chiming.

"I will bring you the medicine, and I will pray that

you may have strength for the work before you," she said, as she departed. When she returned she found him more composed, but looking like one stricken with dull despair.

"God bless you!" he cried, as he took the glass from her hand; "you are very good to me. *Meliora*, you are a true woman. I was right when I said your friendship was worth more than many a woman's so-called love! But—just this one word ere I go—you do understand this wretched business? You know me for the *criminal* I am?"

"I understand that Mr. Baxter's demand was what you could not comply with—that you had reasons for again postponing the meeting of the organ committee. That there will be a difficulty in producing this money which you held in trust!"

"It is simply an impossibility! Ah! the anticipation of this hour—of the hour that is coming—has been a load upon my heart for many a day! It has been a sword of Damocles, suspended ever since I first was mad enough to tamper with what was not my own. Since the sword *must* fall, the sooner I feel its stroke the better."

"Ah! but Damocles' sword did not fall, did it?"

"It is not recorded that it fell; but that which hangs over me and mine will fall, and justly, too. Ah! who shall say that sin is not punished, even in this world? Nemesis is no mere classical myth. Has not the Lord said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay'? And now I am to reap that which I have sown, that which I have deliberately sown and fostered, from my very youth upward, even till to-day."

There was no more to be said, for the second chiming of the bells was nearly over, and it was time for Mr. Carisbroke to be in the vestry. But he purposely waited to the last moment, in order to avoid, if possible, another encounter with Mr. Baxter. The girls were dressed for church, and waited in the hall; all but Joan, who begged to be left in sole charge of Ruby; her headache was still very wearisome.

Meliora perfectly understood her reluctance to attend that evening's service, and she felt a strong inclination to

follow suit herself, and remain at home, and pray in secret for the unhappy man who had proved himself so unworthy of his sacred office. But, always practical and unselfish, she reasoned thus: "I ought to be there, I am afraid; it will comfort him to see the face of one true friend, and if anything *should* happen—and I feel such a strange presentiment that something unwonted will occur!—I shall know how to act. I think I must go."

And without again seeing Joan, Meliora hastily put on her bonnet and crossed to the church; it was barely two minutes' walk from the hall-door to the Rectory pew. She bowed her head so low in prayer, that Lavinia and Maggie both wondered what had made Meliora take "such a turn of devotion!" The service was already commencing. Mr. Carisbroke was in the reading-desk, and his voice sounded much as usual, Meliora thought, as he declared that "When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive." But there was something pathetic in the tone, when, after a moment's pause, he continued:—"O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in Thine anger, lest Thou bring me to nothing."

And as the service went on the congregation wondered greatly; for never before had their Rector so touchingly confessed that he, and they, had "erred and strayed from their ways like lost sheep;" "had left undone those things which they ought to have done; and done those things which they ought not to have done." To Meliora every word had its due significance; she alone held the key to the mournful mystery.

The prayers were over; the hymn was almost finished, when Mr. Carisbroke ascended the pulpit stairs. He remained so long on his knees that Meliora began to fear he might have fainted. But as the last notes of the organ died away, he lifted his head and looked round upon the congregation. Almost in front of him was his own family, and a little to his right was the churchwardens' pew in which, with solemn countenance, and aspect inscrutable, sat Mr. Baxter. There was a dead silence; it seemed for the moment as if the preacher had forgotten the words of

his text. They came at length, though : "*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*"

The sermon was of the most common-place, for Mr. Carisbroke read it in a dull monotonous tone, and exactly as it was written ; and it was only the filled-in skeleton of an old Lenten discourse, already delivered half-a-dozen times. Of course it was recognised by many present, but no one highly disapproved ; the Perrywood people rather liked to hear something they knew beforehand ; novelty of any sort had for them very little charm.

It was not a long sermon, though it seemed long enough to Meliora, who feverishly wished the whole thing over, and the Rector safe at home. And long enough to Mr. Baxter, who had resolved on another interview with his reverence in the vestry, for the purpose of definitely settling the day for the meeting of the school and organ committees. The more the churchwarden thought about it, the more he made up his mind to put aside his own feelings and "*do his duty*"—or, as he pronounced it, his *dooty* ; which meant that he would have no mercy on the offender ; for by this time Mr. Baxter was fully convinced that the Rector of Perrywood had actually brought himself within reach of the criminal law. He had no doubt that the subscribed funds had been used for private purposes, and that the money now required for sundry disbursements would not be forthcoming. And there he sat in the great square pew, behind the tall blue and gilt staves of office, inexorable as a Fate, apparently listening with laudable decorum to the sermon ; in reality hearing not a word, but going over in his own mind the conversation which he and others would hold in due season with the hapless defaulter in the pulpit.

As the clock struck eight, the Rector closed his sermon-case, and pronounced the accustomed ascription of praise to the Holy Trinity. Then followed the hymn, "*Saviour, breathe an evening blessing,*" &c., and afterwards the final prayer. And then for the first time, Mr. Carisbroke faltered visibly ; he seemed to have unaccountably forgotten the familiar words, which must have fallen from his lips more times than he could number. At "*grafted inwardly in our hearts,*" he stopped short,

evidently unable to proceed, an unintelligible murmur followed, and the wondering congregation heard only, "through Jesus Christ our Lord."

They waited in vain for the benediction—all was silence, and they rose at length from their knees with many a look of mingled curiosity and alarm towards the pulpit where Mr. Carisbroke yet knelt, his face uncovered, but white and set like death. Lavinia and Margaret glanced at each other in consternation; the twins stared open-mouthed, uncertain whether to laugh or cry, or take no notice. Meliora gazed around in search of some kind, Christian soul to come straightway to the rescue.

Another minute, and several persons were on the pulpit stairs—the strange clergyman from the Grange, Dr. Ingledew, and the two churchwardens. All the others drew back to accord precedence to the Doctor, who spoke gently to the half-prostrate Rector, but received no answer.

"Mr. Carisbroke! Mr. Carisbroke!" loudly whispered the conscience-smitten Mr. Baxter, pressing forward; "rouse yourself, sir! do rouse yourself. Here's none but friends; just take an arm and come down into the vestry."

But all saw clearly that the Rector was incapable of rising or of rousing himself; down those pulpit stairs which his feet had trodden for nearly a quarter of a century, he would never walk again. The Rev. Mr. Holli-day, in loud voice, pronounced the Benediction, standing side by side with him whom God had smitten; then he begged the congregation quietly to disperse, which, very slowly, they did, while the Rector was with great difficulty lifted and carried to the vestry.

Thither followed Meliora and the elder girls; Netta and Brenda ran home arm-in-arm, and rushed at once into the nursery, where, to their astonishment, they found Joan on her knees—"saying her prayers," as they expressed it. Heedless of waking little Ruby, by whose cradle their sister knelt, they cried, first one and then the other, "Papa is dead, Joan! I am sure papa is dead!"

Joan rose, and seemed on the point of fainting, while Brenda continued, breaking into sobs, "Struck dead! Just like Ananias and Sapphira!" And weeping also, Netta echoed, "Just like Ananias and Sapphira!"

Then Ruby's little wail was heard, and the next moment there were sounds below of men's footsteps bearing a heavy burden. Joan stood white and fixed, like one stunned, hearing, yet not heeding, the cries of her darling, and vaguely wondering if it was not altogether a dreadful, agonising dream.

Mr. Baxter did not enter the house; he walked away, saying to himself, "God forgive me my hard thoughts of him! Lead us not into temptation."



CHAPTER XII.

"WE MUST BE STRONG."

One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
So fast they follow.

MR. CARISBROKE, however, was not dead, as his young daughters affirmed; but for a little while it did not occur to Joan to doubt the accuracy of her sisters' report. She stood rooted to the spot, by the cradle, mechanically touching it with her foot to still the little one's loud cries. Miss Ruby could not understand why she was not taken up immediately, according to custom; never before had she made her protest all unheeded by her sister-godmother, and she shrieked on louder and louder, till the girl who officiated as nurse came to the rescue, looking almost as scared as poor Joan herself.

Her entrance seemed to break the spell, for somebody spoke, and there was a lull in the loud sobbing of the twins, and Joan had strength to gasp out that she would go downstairs and see if she could be of any use.

"Ay, Miss Joan, do!" said the brisk nursemaid. "I will take all care of Miss Ruby. You might give Miss Martin a helping hand; all the others are too frightened to know what they are about. But I think he's coming to—poor master!"

"Oh, then!" cried Joan, with a burst of tears that wonderfully relieved her, "then he is not *dead*! What could make you say so, Netta and Brenda?"

"He looked dead!" answered Brenda, with an injured air, "and I dare say he is dead; how should that girl know?"

"How should that girl know?" responded Netta.

Leaving the twin sisters, Joan, though still trembling in every limb, hastened downstairs. Her father lay on the large old-fashioned sofa in the dining-room, whither he had been carried from the church. He looked very like death, certainly; but he breathed, and was speaking incoherently in a low, smothered voice. His neckcloth was removed, his clerical waistcoat unbuttoned, and Dr. Ingledew was laying a cold wet cloth on his temples. Meliora, very white, but still equal to the occasion, was promptly doing all there was to do under the Doctor's supervision. It was a positive relief to her to see Joan come in, and she beckoned to her, saying in an undertone, "Take my place, dear, and rub your papa's hands; *so*! Maggie, will you put a rug over his feet? I expect they are deathly cold. And, Lavinia, will you give me about a teaspoonful of that brandy, in water, for I feel rather poorly myself?"

As indeed she did. Meliora had had a very trying day, and the agitation of the last few hours had been a greater strain almost than she could bear. And she was not a remarkably strong woman, though rejoicing in a sound and vigorous constitution.

"Oh! don't break down, pray don't!" implored Lavinia hysterically, ready to pour down Meliora's throat all the alcohol in the sideboard-cupboards, if that would suffice to keep her with all her wits about her, staunch and able at her post.

"The one thing now is to get our patient to bed," said Dr. Ingledew at length; "I am afraid he must be carried upstairs, for he is quite incapable of making so much exertion as to walk even with assistance. Who will help me?"

"The clerk and sexton are both in the kitchen, I think," said Meliora. "I will call them."

And so, by kindly hands, the Rector was carried to his

chamber, which he was never to leave for many a day ; and from whence he was never more to go forth hale and hearty, as he had been till within the last few weeks—or rather days—for it was only when the leaves were falling thickly on the damp, sodden lawns that the true peril of his position had flashed upon him. When the Doctor left his patient Meliora followed him ; and when they were alone in the library, where that discarded sermon, with its “ Well done, good and faithful servant ! ” still lay upon the table, she asked : “ Now, Dr. Ingledew, tell me what is to be done ? ”

“ There is not much to be done at present, Miss Martin. Give him some kind of nourishment, anything you can persuade him to take. I leave it to your discretion to find that which is most suitable ; and do not let him have any more stimulant, unless by my orders. I will send a composing draught, which must be taken the last thing. And I think you had better have in Nurse Barnard at once ; I know she is at home, for she spoke to me to-day, and said she was in want of a place.”

“ Will a nurse be required ? ” asked Meliora. “ Will he be more than poorly when he has quite recovered from the faintness ? ”

“ Miss Martin, you are a woman of sense, and I do not believe in deluding people, even of mediocre parts ; so I tell you candidly that I am afraid, very much afraid, Mr. Carisbroke is going to be extremely ill ! I may be mistaken—I hope I am—but it will be well to be prepared for the worst.”

“ It is not, then, an ordinary fainting-fit ? ”

“ It is *not* an ordinary fainting-fit. I hardly know what to call it. I can scarcely tell you at present what I apprehend ; there are symptoms of fever, there are premonitions of something still more serious.”

“ I think I understand you. Yes, Nurse Barnard had better come to us immediately. She is a trustworthy woman, though not so sweet-tempered as we might wish, and she is very fond of Mr. Carisbroke. He would not like to have a stranger about him.”

“ He ought not to see a strange face, for he is very feeble ; there is a certain irritation of the brain which

warns us to keep him as undisturbed as possible. And that reminds me, Miss Martin—it is my duty to inquire, and yours, if you can, to answer me—has Mr. Carisbroke had any kind of shock, quite recently? Has anything happened to-day, or perhaps yesterday, especially tending to agitate his mind?"

Meliora was silent from sheer embarrassment. Too well she knew the fatal secret of this sudden indisposition; but was she justified in giving Dr. Ingledew the remotest hint of the truth? She began to speak, then paused, not knowing what she ought to answer, and yet aware that her silence must confirm his worst suspicions. He resumed,—
 "Miss Martin, I think you know; you may trust me. And what is more, I can give a shrewd guess at the truth. Of course, the Rector's money difficulties have become town talk, and I don't hesitate to say some rather unkind things have been said, both in our own village and at Mas-sington. For my part, I have been cognisant of Mr. Carisbroke's unfortunate position for a period of six or seven years; I should say he was never a man of business, and he was brought up, most unluckily for him, to spend lavishly on himself; to gratify his tastes and desires at any cost; and, above all, to put off—or rather to *stave off*—the evil day, till the accumulation of embarrassments—in the shape of debt, liabilities, &c.—became overwhelming. It is my opinion, indeed—why should I mince matters, as we are speaking confidentially!—I *know* that the time has arrived for a public exposure of the poor Rector's affairs. He will be dealt with as any other bankrupt, and the 'living' will be sequestered from the forthcoming Christmas. He will have only the residue of his wife's property for his support; and that—I speak from actual knowledge—has been so greatly diminished from various causes, that I fear it must be altogether insufficient for the maintenance of any kind of establishment. Now, it strikes me that either yesterday, or perhaps to-day, something occurred—a trifle perhaps—which has revealed to him the entire hopelessness of his position. Am I not right?"

"I think you are! I know things are coming, or have come, to a crisis," said Meliora at last, thankful to find

that the Doctor had no suspicion of the true state of affairs, and that she was not in any way compelled to speak more openly.

Dr. Ingledew knew quite enough to guide him in making a diagnosis of the case. He had already decided that the illness proceeded from extreme mental agitation; and that some fresh cause of disturbance had quite recently occurred was likely enough, even to an outsider,—some aggravation of circumstances which had been the crowning blow. She could keep the secret, therefore, without fearing to compromise the safety of the patient. The Doctor knew all that it was necessary he should know for the wise treatment of the sick man.

"Yes," continued he, "it is as I thought, as I feared. Our poor friend is like a man who obstinately turns his back on the thunder-cloud which is slowly growing in blackness on the horizon, and then sinks helpless and confounded when the storm bursts upon him. Well, Miss Martin, I leave you in command, and I will take care that Nurse Barnard comes to you for the night. She will bring the composing draught, and you may expect me quite early in the morning."

"Just one word more, Dr. Ingledew. Is the Rector conscious, do you think?"

"He is conscious to a certain extent, but he is not by any means himself. Allow no one in the room, save the nurse and one of the girls who may be most efficient. If she were two or three years older, I should say select Miss Joan; there is more of the woman in her than in any of her elder sisters."

"It is Joan whom I must take for a helper. I have no other choice. Lavinia is, at present, hysterical and frightened, and has no idea of controlling her feelings. Maggie is too abrupt, too loud, for a sick chamber."

"I tell you what, Miss Martin, there is no more valuable lesson to be learnt than that of self-control. Teach your young people to restrain their feelings; to remain calm while excitement reigns about them, to keep back tears, hasty words, lamentations, cries, outbursts of any kind. To indulge one's own feelings continually is the very acme of selfishness, and renders a person, especially a

woman, so worthless as to be an actual encumbrance. I know no creature on earth more aggravating, more *despicable*, than the woman who shrieks or exclaims under the smallest provocation. Well, good-night ! Take care of yourself, and take care of Joan ; for you and she, with nurse for your coadjutor, will have to fight this battle to the end."

As soon as Dr. Ingledew had left the house, Joan, still pale and trembling, stole into the library. Up to this moment she had controlled herself. After that brief outburst in the nursery, she had kept stern hold upon herself, and refrained from tears ; but now the girl's strength, which had been overtaxed for so many hours, gave way—she was little over fourteen, you must remember—and she threw herself into Meliora's motherly arms, and wept there unrestrainedly. And Meliora, for awhile, wept with her, and the ebullition, no doubt, did them good. It is unwise to put an over-pressure on the safety-valve, even as it is contemptible to yield to every passing weakness of nerves or brain.

Meliora was, naturally, the first to recover herself. "Now, then, Joan, my dear," she said, almost sharply, "we must be strong ; we have had enough of this. We were overwrought, and our feelings have had their way ; but here must be the end of it. No true woman cries and bemoans herself when action is possible. Let us consult as to what is best ! You and I have a secret to keep, Joan, and we must keep it—if *we can*."

"Ah ! if we can ! Oh, Meliora, it is true, then ?"

"Quite true, my darling. I saw you understood it all only too well. But, thank God, no one else understands, no one else even guesses, except Mr. Baxter, and he may be dealt with."

"I am afraid not, Meliora ; I know him. He is a hard, stern man, and papa and he have had differences in time past. He is one who talks, *ad nauseam*, about his 'Christian dooty,' and his Christian 'dooty' unfortunately always accords with his personal inclination. If he can humble poor papa, he will ; I am sure he will ! and he will have no mercy."

"We must put it out of his power."

"How can we? I see it all as plainly as if I were the only person concerned. It is horrible to speak of, but this is how it stands. The money—I don't know how much—has been paid to papa, as treasurer of the organ committee, and for that other affair—the screen, or *reredos*, or whatever it is called. Well! papa unadvisedly has used that money for private purposes; it was *wrong*, of course—altogether wrong; but it is not for us, for me, his daughter, to condemn him. It strikes me that it was to pay Frank's Oxford debts that the funds were first and in great part appropriated. However it was, there stands the terrible fact—the money entrusted to papa is gone, and cannot be replaced. Mr. Baxter suspects this. He is chairman of the committee and churchwarden—people's churchwarden, to boot, and not over friendly to papa! He is pressing a settlement of affairs, not unjustly; and though we may manage to get a meeting or two adjourned, the fatal day must come, and all must be disclosed. *Meliora*, if I could sell myself into slavery to avert this misery, this indelible disgrace, I would do it."

"I know you would, dearest. But I think we can manage Mr. Baxter."

"We could not put him off with untruths—not even with excuses!"

"Certainly not! We will speak the truth, my Joan, and truth only, whatever shall betide. I have a plan, but I must have a few days in which to work it out. Now, your father himself urged that the meeting could not be this week, and it *cannot*, even if he were willing. His illness prevents it effectually. By next week you and I will contrive to know all about it, and act for him."

"We can only confess—what is shameful."

"No! we are more than justified in keeping what is shameful to ourselves. Let the accounts be audited any day next week—say Tuesday or Wednesday week—and the money shall be forthcoming."

"But where is it to come *from*?"

"Don't concern yourself about it, my dear; I can find it without much trouble. Your papa will have one creditor more, that is all, and no one will be the wiser. We will keep our little secret, you, and he, and myself."

"You mean that you will lend it to us? Oh, Meliora, how very good you are! But are you sure you can spare it? I am afraid we ought not to take from you the savings of years, the money you have so hardly earned. For my part, I don't see when or how it is to be paid back again."

"Never mind that. It will be an after consideration. The great thing, at present, is to relieve your poor papa's mind of its heaviest burden, and to keep him from the blame which must attach to him, unless speedy measures be taken."

"Meliora, I want to know what would be the consequences if these 'speedy measures,' which you alone can take, were to be—*not taken*; if things were allowed to go on—as go on they must, I am afraid, but for you—to the bitter end?"

"The consequences would be most disastrous. I fear the offence, in spite of every palliation, would be treated as a felony. The Rector would then be tried and found guilty; the punishment would be a term of imprisonment, perhaps of penal servitude. In former times, when the law was most severe, it might have been death."

"Oh, how dreadful! how very dreadful! What terrible life-long disgrace! It would kill poor papa; he, of all men, to suffer hardship and imprisonment! but to us who survived, how great would be the misery. We should have to change our name, to go where no one knew us; we could never hold up our heads in our own country again. I would rather die than live with such a slur upon me."

"Fortunately, my dear, we cannot die when we wish. God gives strength to those who seek it, even in their direst need. But we will not contemplate any sort of extremity. The subscription-money *must* be paid into Mr. Baxter's hands with the least possible delay. He must never be allowed to know that his suspicions of to-day were correct. Now, Joan, we will have some supper. No, I dare say you are not hungry; I am not. Who could be, in such a painful strait? But you see we are only flesh and blood, nerves and sinews, and cannot, even with the best intentions, keep ourselves well and vigorous for

our work without proper nourishment and repose. And you and I must neither sink nor flinch, Joan. It comes to this, that the family welfare, as well as your papa's safety, mainly depend upon us two. We alone know the truth, and have to guard the dangerous secret; we only are at all fitted to assist Dr. Ingledew and Nurse Barnard. As well expect a lamp to burn without oil, as a mortal to think and act wisely, and endure fatigue of mind and body, without food and rest."

"You are right, Meliora, I am beginning to feel ill already; and you! you are looking like a ghost; only I never saw one. And, as you say, we must not fail; certainly *you* must not, for though I were brave and strong as a lion, I could do nothing without you."

"We will ask God to strengthen us for our work, dear. Unless He help us, all our efforts must be in vain. Take courage, my child; 'behind the clouds is the sun still shining!' God, our Father, will lighten our darkness, and give us peace and joy once more, *when He sees fit*."

"It must be a long time first, Meliora."

"Perhaps so, dear. God knows best. Of one thing we may be sure. He never afflicts willingly, and this time of our tribulation is necessary, and will work out for us the very things most needful both to body and to soul. Now let us go to our supper."

They went to the dining-room, and managed to make something of a meal. Lavinia had gone to bed, really disabled for any kind of service, and Maggie was in attendance on her. The twins were feasting on cold plum-pie and custard, and were most unwilling to be obliged to retire. They grumbled fiercely at the "favouritism" shown to Joan, who might "sit up till midnight if she chose."

It was useless to argue with the poor girls; Meliora generally did try to make them understand the *raison d'être* of her commands; but to-night she could not attempt to discuss the point. She only said, "I shall send Joan to bed as soon as I can do without her; for awhile, I want her to help me in several matters. Your papa is very ill, my dears—worse, perhaps, than you imagine! We are all in great trouble; do not, I beg, be tiresome and

disobedient. There's good children—away to bed! it is getting very late!"

The twins sulkily retired, and again Joan and her governess were alone. Meliora was just going upstairs to the invalid, who had been left for awhile with the one servant who could be trusted, when there was a long and loud peal at the door-bell.

"Who *can* that be!" cried Joan, starting. "Nurse Barnard would certainly go to the back hall-door. Can it be Mr. Baxter come again?"

"I dare say it is some one from the Grange, or elsewhere, kindly anxious for the last account; but how thoughtless to make so much noise in a house where there is known to be sickness!"

"I do not hear any one going to the door; they will ring again, whoever it may be."

"I will go. Lucy is in the nursery, and Nancy is with her master; I suppose Sarah does not hear."

The door was not yet bolted for the night, and Meliora fearlessly threw it wide open. There stood the figure of a tall man wrapped in a shaggy overcoat, and there was something so strange in his attitude that for a moment her strong heart quailed. But Joan, who stood so that the light of the hall-lamp fell full upon the intruder's face, cried out, "Oh, Frank, how you frightened us! We did not expect you for three weeks."

"I dare say not; I did not expect myself," said the young man, entering the house, and pushing on for the dining-room. "I say, where's the governor?"

"Papa is ill, very ill in bed!" answered Joan. "Have you had your supper?"

"Yes—no! That is, I had a morsel of bread and cheese, and a glass of ale at Massington, but I don't think I want anything more. I am out of sorts myself. Where are the girls? Why are you and Joan sitting up in secret conclave, Meliora?"

"We are in great trouble, Frank. Your father was taken very ill, struck down, as it were, at the close of this evening's service. He had been unwell all day, and ought not to have gone into the pulpit."

"Had anything been upsetting him, do you know?"

"Much, I fear. The fact is, Frank, things are come to such a pass that utter ruin is staring him in the face. There is no resource left. Can you wonder that he succumbs?"

"No, indeed; but it's a bad hearing—a very bad hearing, Meliora; and——"

"I hope you have not come to him for money?"

"Not exactly—it's worse than that. I'm in trouble myself, and trouble that even money won't pull me out of, I am afraid. I have said good-bye to Oxford. My University career is ended."

"What is the matter? Are you ill? or—you surely have not been *rusticated*?"

"For good and for all, Meliora; it's of no use to beat about the bush, for the truth must come out. I've gone and done for myself, and the Dons have kicked me out."

"Expelled you, do you mean?"

"Expelled me, if you like to call it that. If I repent in sackcloth and ashes, they will never take me in again. After what has passed, no college will ever receive me."

"What have you done?"

"Don't ask me, I can't tell you. I *must* tell the governor, I suppose."

"That you cannot; Mr. Carisbroke is too ill even to see you, at present; and in his state the slightest agitation might be fatal. Joan, dear, will you go and see if Nurse Barnard has arrived?"

Exit Joan. And then Meliora resumed: "You had better tell me your story, Frank, for I do not know when it will be possible for your father to hear it, perhaps it will be *never*!"

"You don't mean to say things are so bad as that! Meliora, your looks frighten me. But, I say, I can't tell you what the bother is—not all of it. You're a woman, you know."

"Frank Carisbroke, if you have done something that you cannot tell to a middle-aged woman like myself—a woman old enough to be your mother—you must indeed be a scoundrel."

"Well, I'll tell you, if you like; it's a bad business, I own; don't blame me if I say things you don't like to hear."

And then came out such a history as made Meliora's cheeks glow again. It needs not to be repeated here ; suffice it to say that though Frank Carisbroke made light of his transgressions, he could not but feel that his own words covered him with guilt and shame, and exposed him to the contempt and righteous indignation of the kind-hearted, but high-principled woman to whom he made confession.

When he had finished, he sat staring gloomily at her. At last she said, "God forgive you, Frank Carisbroke ! you have brought sorrow to the house of sorrow."



CHAPTER XIII.

THE IMPECUNIOUS HOUSEHOLD.

"An idler is a watch that wants both hands ;
As useless if it goes as if it stands."

"He that steals my purse steals trash !"

DR. INGLEDEW's predictions were abundantly verified ; the Rector soon became exceedingly ill, and for many days occupied the whole thought and attendance of the anxious household. Frank's *escapade*—as he slightly called his great transgression—was speedily known in the neighbourhood, and he found himself, greatly to his annoyance, sent to Coventry by all the respectable families of Perrywood. It was of extreme importance that he should not appear in his father's presence, Mr. Carisbroke being at times quite sensible enough to put two and two together, and wonder why his son should be at home so long before the regular vacation.

Frank himself was perfectly willing to keep out of his father's chamber—indeed, he began to feel a strong desire to keep out of everybody's way ; he would sit in his own room, over a roaring fire, from morning till night, inces-

santly smoking and reading trashy novels. One afternoon he went to Lavinia. "I say, Vinnie, I want a word with you. You're the purse-bearer, I suppose? Keeper of his Reverence's privy-purse, eh?"

"There is no purse to keep, Frank. Don't come to me for money."

"What on earth do you mean? Somebody must have some money, you know!"

"Meliora has some, I suppose; but you would hardly go to her for your supplies."

"By the powers—*no!* I'm getting quite in awe of Meliora; she treats me as if I were a criminal. I don't understand it; she seems to me to be mistress here? Except that you take the head of the table, and that callers ask for you and leave cards on *you*—not on her—you might be a visitor in your own house. She seems to have the ordering of everything! She is commander-in-chief, and Joan is her *aide-de-camp*. I wouldn't stand it, if I were you, young woman. I thought better of you; I always fancied you were a girl of spirit. What has made you so milk-and-watery all of a sudden?"

"I don't know what you call milk-and-watery. As for spirit, I have had enough worry to take out of me all I ever had—for months I've been keeping house on what you would style twopence-halfpenny a-week!"

"It seems to me you are all gone crazy together."

"Perhaps we are; we have had enough to drive us a little out of our minds, I think. But it seems to me, Frank, that if any one is not quite sane just now, it is yourself! You are a man, and able to work, and instead of trying to help us, you make matters worse by increasing expenses."

"I like that, indeed! What next, I wonder! I'll tell you what it is, Vin. You are all—except those blessed little simpletons, Netta and Brenda—in league against me. You forget that if anything happens to the governor I am master here, and can turn you all adrift, your precious Meliora included."

At that moment Meliora came in. She had heard the latter part of Frank's delightful speech, and she perceived that Lavinia's cheeks were burning, and her eyes full of

indignant tears—unmistakable signals of distress in her case. It behoved Miss Martin to hasten to the rescue. "Well!" she asked, curtly, "what about Meliora, and who is going to send her adrift?"

Mr. Frank looked very foolish. He had the grace to stammer out some kind of apology, for he had quite sense enough to perceive—though ready to rebel at this state of affairs—that Meliora was really the mainstay of the family, and that to offend her would be an act of folly. He answered, sulkily, "I didn't mean anything disagreeable, and how could I tell you were at the door? I hate those folding screens; they are only good for stage-surprises. And, Meliora, it's enough to make a fellow cranky, when he's looked black at and lectured by his sisters, and told that there is no money in the house! How is a fellow to get on without money? I tell you candidly, Meliora, I haven't at this moment a shilling in my pocket."

"I am sorry to hear it, for you had a great many shillings several months ago. Your father and your sisters have had to pinch terribly ever since because of the sum you had in your pocket when you last left Perrywood. Frank Carisbroke, you have been a heavy trial to your father; the burden of your debt and your expenditure has been more than he could bear. The state in which he now lies is largely attributable to you."

"Oh, come, now, that's too bad! Why, I wasn't here, and I hadn't written for a month when he was taken ill; so I could have had nothing to do with that, you know!"

"Indeed, you had a great deal, if not everything, to do with it. He had not only to strip himself, but to incur inexpedient obligations, in order to pay your debts. And you promised solemnly that you would never exceed your allowance again."

"And I haven't—I haven't, Meliora! That is to say, I have not much exceeded it. I don't believe I owe more than forty, or, perhaps, fifty, pounds in Oxford or elsewhere. One must live and make a decent show; you'll admit that, both of you."

"I suppose one must *live*, and, if possible, out of the workhouse. As for decency, the less said about it the better, for your career has *not* been decent, Frank, as you

must acknowledge. But it is useless to retort or to recriminate. This house stands face to face with total ruin, with possible disgrace—perhaps with *death*! What are you going to do—not to retrieve matters, but to provide for yourself?”

“I say, Miss Martin, you are taking no end upon yourself! If we are so badly off as you and Vinnie affirm, our first retrenchment ought to be in the way of salaries and wages. I told my father long ago that we ought not, in our straitened circumstances, to keep so expensive a governess; my poor, dear mother thought so from the beginning. Indeed, I don’t see what we want with a governess at all; it is of no use worrying the twins with lessons and exercises; they can read and write and dance, and that’s enough. Joan knows too much already; but if her education must be carried on, let her study by herself, with a little assistance from her elders. I shall speak to the governor about it as soon as he is in a condition to attend to business.”

“Oh, do hush!” cried Lavinia, in an agony of distress; “you do not know in the least what you are talking about! *Meliora* has *nothing* a year from us; she doesn’t take a penny from papa, though she saves him many a pound. For heaven’s sake don’t try to drive her away; if she left us we should be beggars—paupers—everything that is dreadful.”

Frank changed colour. Though weak as water, and of late, for want of strong principle, guilty in a moral point of view, the young man was not quite disingenuous, nor was his character devoid of generosity. It flashed upon him that he owed more than he knew to *Meliora*, and that he was behaving to her most shamefully. “I beg your pardon——” he began.

But *Meliora* interrupted him. “Frank Carisbroke,” she said, “it matters very little to me what is your opinion of me, or what constructions you put upon my actions; for I know I am doing my best for your family, and, I think—for *you*! little as you deserve it. But, as you have spoken frankly, so will I. What are you going to do? You cannot live upon your father, for he has so little left to live upon, that I fear he will find it insufficient for his own

needs and for those who are naturally dependent upon him. A great deal of money has been expended on your education—that is to say, a great deal has been paid to your credit since you left Rugby. It is quite time you turned it to some account. Your father can no longer support you.”

“What has gone with all the money? I never knew anything so preposterous, so truly astonishing. Why! everybody knows that my father’s income is a good £2,000 a-year; and I am sure, from the dinners you have given us since I came home, and the insufficient staff of servants maintained, the family must be living at scarcely any cost. I do think, as my father’s only son, and his representative, I ought to be allowed a voice in the administration.”

“Have you any idea how much money your father has laid down for you within the last three years?”

“Not I! I never could keep accounts. What is the use? The beggars are sure to send in their bills, and you know when your money is all gone, unluckily.”

“Keeping no accounts generally means reckless expenditure. However, Frank, we are only wasting breath in debating the question of spending, for there is nothing left to spend, as your sisters can assure you. They have no new winter dresses, nor can they have any. Money is owing to every shopkeeper with whom the family have dealt. Debt has been accumulating from year to year, and people are out of all patience, and refuse to wait any longer for payment. More than this, money has been borrowed, partly for you, I believe, at usurious interest; and there are long-standing arrears, both of principal and interest. And you must know what long-deferred payments signify when large sums are due to money-lenders.”

“A crew of harpies! A vile set of Jews who deserve to——”

“There, that will do. Who pities the beast-tamer, when for his temerity he gets his head bitten off in the lion’s mouth? Leave money-lenders alone, and they will never show you their fangs. Do not interrupt me, for I want you to understand your true position. Money is owed on all sides, in large sums and in small sums; and every day of grace that has been granted has increased

the total, by adding interest to interest. During the three years to which I referred, your father has laid down for you exactly six thousand pounds—his whole income for that period, including the private property from your mother's estate. What remained for the rest of the family?"

Frank looked angry and confused; he knew that Meliora spoke the truth. She went on: "Your father now deeply regrets that he ever exceeded his yearly income; he began to do it almost immediately after his marriage, and it grew into a habit. There is a vulgar saying that 'money breeds money!'—that debt breeds debt is quite as certain; but a day of reckoning *must* come. It has come to Perrywood Rectory, and as you claim the privileges of sonship you ought certainly to take upon yourself its responsibilities. What do you advise should be done, your father being incapable of attending to his own affairs?"

"Why, nothing can be done, of course, till he gets about again. It's a terrible nuisance being short of money; but here's the old house over our heads, and I suppose the butcher and the baker won't refuse us bread and meat? We must pull along as well as we can, that's all, Meliora, and I am sure it is very kind of you to assume the office of house-keeper without wages; but I wish you were a little more liberal in your ideas. Why you make us dine in the middle of the day, I cannot think. Late dinners don't cost more than early ones, do they?"

"Yes, they are more expensive in several ways; for one thing, they make more work in the kitchen, and the servants have now quite as much as they can get through. As regards the butcher, up till very lately he has been charging what he pleased, and sending us very inferior joints; he has been heard loudly to declare that two or three families like 'those dishonest Carisbrokes' would be the ruin of him! Since I have taken the housekeeping in hand I have paid him ready money; but we have all agreed to do with as little butcher's meat as possible. Joan has been attending to the poultry all the summer, and we have been eating our own fowls and chickens till we are tired of them; the pigeons, too, were an increasing

expense, and they have been killed, all but two or three pairs, and made into pies. We have consumed nearly all our bacon, and the sty is empty; there is, I believe, one ham uncooked. Our bread is home-made; it comes cheaper, and is more wholesome; and I have taught Nancy how to manage it. Happily, we have a fine stock of vegetables, and it has been a good fruit year. The apple-room is full, and we have a nice stock of preserves in hand."

"Vegetables are all very well, but one cannot live on cabbages and potatoes; and *soupe-maigre* is not exactly appetising."

"Replenish the housekeeper's purse, and you shall have better dinners."

"Meliora! Lavinia! are you not trying to frighten me? We can't be in such desperate case—we can't, I say! There is *some* money coming in, of a surety; plenty of money, I should say! Let the beasts of tradesmen wait a little longer. Let me see. There are the autumn tithes and the glebe rents, and I don't know what all! Then there's poor mother's money, which is paid quarterly. It's only to run on till Christmas, and there will be plenty of cash, and to spare."

Meliora began to lose her patience; she was tired of dinning the words "disgrace" and "ruin" into deaf ears. At last she said, "Do you know that the living is to be sequestrated — *is* sequestrated, indeed, by order of the bishop. What remains of your mother's own fortune is all that is left. It will be years before the proceeds of the living go once more into your father's pockets. Do you mean to tell me you do not know this?"

Frank was fairly startled. "I have heard you speak of such a thing," he answered, his colour coming and going. "I heard Maggie say we must turn out because we could not keep up this house and the grounds on two or three hundred a year. But I thought it was only *talk*. A Church of England clergyman can't be turned out of his rectory, you know."

"A Church of England clergymen can be proceeded against as if he were a layman, if he do not pay his debts. His cloth does not protect him, if he puts himself within the grasp of the law."

"Then what *are* you going to do?"

"Nothing at present. We are hoping daily that your father may recover sufficiently to be consulted. In the meantime, as he cannot take duty, the clergymen who necessarily officiate for him have to be paid. There will be Dr. Ingledew's bill, of course—no light one, considering the number of his visits; and we are obliged to keep Nurse Barnard, though we can ill afford the extra expense. The best plan will be to let the Rectory for a term of years—or shut up part of it, and make a market of the garden. We might get a very fair profit out of the kitchen gardens and the orchards. I doubt whether it would pay to keep up the vineries—it might if one of us thoroughly understood grape-forcing. But all that must be left."

Frank Carisbroke, though inheriting a fair share of his father's carelessness and natural *bonhomie*, was his mother's own son as regarded weakness of character. He resembled her in many points—he was indolent and luxurious, without any idea of helping himself or of accommodating himself to circumstances. Reflection, too, was what he hated; he seemed as little inclined to look ahead as the birds of the air or the beasts of the field; and, now that at last he really and truly comprehended his position, as the penniless son of a bankrupt father, he was utterly aghast. He seemed quite inclined to sit down and cry. But he ceased to interfere with the enforced economy of the household; he moaned his moan to his elder sisters, and even to the twins, whom he made excessively wretched and lachrymose; but he rebelled no more against Meliora's government, and he contrived to exist "without a shilling in his pocket!"

But day by day matters became more complicated at Perrywood Rectory. Mr. Carisbroke improved but slowly, so slowly that it would have been the height of cruelty to have appealed to him on any kind of business. The fever which had attacked him was not of a severe kind; perhaps a man of his disposition never does die of brain fever! Gradually he began to speak and look like himself; but he remained miserably weak, and there was a curious lack of power in the lower limbs that rather affrighted those who were always about him.

So long as close confinement to his bed was a matter of course, this debility was not noticed, or it was supposed to be only the result of illness ; but when the fever was gone, and appetite returned, and the patient wanted to get up and turn over some of his favourite books, his nurses looked grave indeed, for he was no more able to walk or stand than his little Ruby. There seemed but small probability of his return to pulpit duties.

He began to be apprehensive himself ; and one day, just before Christmas, he asked to be left alone with the Doctor—he had some particular questions to ask him. He waited till Dr. Ingledew had made his usual observations, then he said, “ How is it, Doctor, that I don’t get upon my legs again ? ”

“ You are so very weak ; you have had a severe illness,” replied the Doctor, evasively.

“ I know that,” was the Rector’s rejoinder ; “ I know that the fever has left me miserably weak ; but I am getting up my strength in other ways. As I sit, or recline rather, on this couch, I feel pretty well in myself. If I could only get about a little—take a little gentle exercise in the gallery outside—if even I could pace the room for a change sometimes, I should soon get up my strength. Dr. Ingledew, *when* shall I take to my legs again ? ”

And the Rector looked his Doctor keenly in the face. The time was come to hint at the truth ; it could be concealed no longer. It only remained to admit, as gently as might be, to the unfortunate man, that he was the victim of hopeless paralysis. It was no fainting-fit which had laid him prostrate on that memorable Sunday evening, now more than five weeks ago ; but something of a far more serious nature, the results of which would never leave him while he lived. Dr. Ingledew had had his fears from the beginning, but he hoped they might be, after all, mere unfounded apprehensions, and he refrained from adding to the distress of the much-tried family. As the fever gradually succumbed, the Doctor’s anxiety increased. His patient could sit up with less and less fatigue. He began to relish his food, to talk of passing events, but *not* to stand upon his feet. Again Mr. Carisbroke questioned, “ When may I hope to walk about a little, Dr. Ingledew ? ”

"My dear sir," was the grave answer—and the kind, serious face told more than the mere words—"I am afraid there is something seriously wrong with the lower extremities. I should like another opinion."

"It would be of no use," replied the Rector, almost sharply. "I understand you; I have feared this for days—ever since I found my head was clear, and my arms and shoulders regaining their natural force. I am a helpless paralytic, a cripple for life."

"I will not try to deceive you, Mr. Carisbroke, by telling you to expect what I cannot myself anticipate. It is quite possible, though, that rest and proper treatment may partially restore the vigour of the limbs. I am afraid you will never be much of a walker again; but there is just a chance of amendment. I have a patient at Massington, who was suddenly seized as you were, and lost all use of the lower extremities. I feared much there would never be any change, but for the worse; yet, to my great surprise, he has recovered up to a certain point, and is now able to hobble round his garden with one crutch. He hopes soon to be able to manage with a stick."

"And how long was he helpless?"

"About five years, I think."

"And that is the extent of the hope you can hold out to me?"

"Would to God, my dear friend, I could feel myself warranted in bidding you expect a return of your former vigour; but I should do you no real kindness if I bade you look for what I fear—greatly fear—will never come to pass. There may be partial recovery, but not the perfect restoration we could desire."

"Thank you, Dr. Ingledew;" and there was something like a sob in the poor Rector's voice; "you have been very kind to me all through my trouble—kind to me always, though your bills have been unpaid, I dare not think for how long! And it is not the least of your kind acts that now you tell me the painful truth. It is no more than I have suspected for many days; indeed, from the first I thought this strange numbness and want of power must be something more than ordinary debility. What is to become of me?"

"Your first duty is to get as well as may be ; then we can lay schemes for the future."

"For five Sundays I have not filled my own pulpit. God knows if I shall ever fill it again. Who is taking the duty?"

"Mr. Holliday took it, declining all remuneration, for the first two Sundays. One of the Cotswoldbury clergymen came over for two more; last Sunday your late curate, Mr. Selwyn, officiated. Your best plan will be to engage another regular curate; it is always worrying to depend upon chance services."

"But the living is sequestrated; you know that."

"I have heard so. Had you not better request advice from your diocesan?"

"I think I will write the Bishop! Thank God, my hands can hold a pen as well as ever! One thing is certain, I am going to be a poor man—a very poor man, for one who has lived, as I have for many years, in the lap of luxury. I cannot see how I am to support my family."

"Your family must bestir themselves; a little adversity in youth never does young people any harm. Still, I fancy from what I am able to guess, that you may perhaps keep your girls together; if they are willing to exert themselves at home. Mr. Frank must, of course, turn out—*must* turn out, I say! He ought to be helping you in this most painful emergency, not hanging upon the home resources that remain."

"He can never complete his *curriculum*. He cannot possibly return to Oxford to take his degree."

Dr. Ingledew smiled grimly. He knew well enough that Frank was expelled his University, but he thought his patient had heard enough bad news for one day. He only said: "Mr. Frank, in my opinion, was never fitted for the clerical profession. It is better that he should turn his thoughts to business. I hope he is looking out."

"He has only just come home," replied the deluded father; "term is but just over; I am glad to see he is looking more serious than usual."

"More serious, indeed!" thought the Doctor, as he

went slowly down the broad oaken stairs into the hall where Mr. Frank, in elegant undress, was pacing to and fro, a richly embroidered smoking cap on his head, and his sleek white hands behind him; "I wish I had the handling of him, young fool and spendthrift that he is! and I think I'll give him a word of a sort!"

"How is my father, Doctor?" said the *dilettante* youth, superciliously, with a little of the fashionable drawl that was partly a defect of nature, and partly affectation.

"Your father, sir, is about as well as he ever will be in this world," replied the Doctor roughly.

"What *do* you mean, Dr. Ingledew?" inquired the young man, considerably startled both by words and manner. "Why! he can't stand upon his legs!"

"And never will, unless I am greatly mistaken. Your father's troubles have been rather too much for him, Mr. Frank. What we called a fainting fit was a paralytic stroke. He knows it; and it is quite as well you should know it. He will never have the use of his lower limbs again!"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Frank. "Why! how is he to preach, or read prayers, if he cannot stand?"

"Some one must preach and read for him, if he is to remain Rector of Perrywood. If you had not behaved so foolishly—so disgracefully, I may say—you might in a few months' time have received ordination, and been the staff and support of your afflicted family. That is out of the question now; all you can do is to set to work at once, and relieve the household of your maintenance."

"What *can* I do, Doctor?"

"I don't know. Not much, I fear. Do any honest work you can find. Dig, plough, carry burdens, load carts, if you can do nothing better. Any kind of labour is more respectable than hanging about a house, eating the bread of idleness. I wish you a good-day."

"I never knew anything like it!" grumbled Frank, as the Doctor disappeared behind the laurels outside. "I'm the worst-used fellow living! everybody thinks it is his or her mission to pitch into me! I wonder the very cats and dogs haven't tried to 'speak faithfully' to me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. AND MRS. BAXTER.

"He soon replied, 'I do admire
Of womankind but one;
And you are she, my dearest dear,
Therefore it shall be done.'"

ALL this time the question of the committee meeting of the Organ and Reredos Funds remained in abeyance. Mr. Baxter was the first to declare that nothing could be done while the Rector was lying on a bed of sickness. But he said to his wife, "I never was more flabbergasted in my life than I was that night his Reverence was taken, for in my heart I felt sure my words had been and done it all; and when folks said he was dead—and he looked it—I felt something, I fancy, like Cain must have felt when he found out he had killed Abel! I won't stir a step, nor speak a word, except to you, Mrs. B., till he's all right again, and fit to face his troubles. And then I'll give him as much time as I can."

"You're a good man, if there ever was one!" replied the Churchwarden's better-half; "and the merciful man is merciful to his beast."

"Ay, so! But you don't mean to say that the Rector is a beast?"

"By no means, Samuel. But it always does one good to quote a bit of Scripture, and the words came into my mind. Merciful you are to man *and* beast, though now and then, when business worrits you, you don't make as much of your own wedded wife as you're bound to, seeing what you promised me, years ago, in that very church, Mr. B.! That's neither here nor there, you say, nor it ain't. Well, about the Rector. Of course, you must bide your time, but sooner or later it must come out. It's your duty to take care the public money is used properly, and I know what it would be called if *you*, as Churchwarden, pocketed the subscriptions, and spent them for yourself."

"I've no doubt poor Mr. Carisbroke wanted the money terribly, and being greatly tempted, he took what he had by him, meaning to put it back again long before it was wanted. He never meant to—*steal it*—appropriate it, perhaps I ought to say."

"Nor more do half the poor creatures that have to do their seven or fourteen years for yielding to just the same temptation. It's a disgrace to anybody to be over head and ears in debt; it's a double disgrace in a clergyman, who ought to adorn his holy office."

"Quite true, Mary Ann, quite true; your sentiments do you honour, my dear. Then you think I've no call to make any fuss about that three hundred pounds till the Rector's well enough to stand up in his own defence?"

"I wouldn't say a syllable about it, Mr. B.; no one expects business to be attended to under such circumstances. But at the right time speak, and speak out. Do your duty without prejudice, and without favours, and them as are guilty must suffer the consequences. You've got the Rector's receipt for all you paid in to him?"

"Of course I have. I always do things in a business-like form and way, as you ought to know by this time, Mrs. B. Catch me paying away my own money, or the parish money either, without a due and legal acknowledgment."

"It's a thousand pities it wasn't all paid to you, straight away, Mr. B.; it would have been as safe in your hands as in the Bank's strong room. People that are short of cash shouldn't put themselves in the way of temptation. Treasurers of any sort should be well-to-do, and not hard-up for a few pounds."

"He has been treasurer for one thing or another ever since he became our rector, and all has gone right, so far. Perhaps, after all, I am suspicious and uncharitable, and it's only me that is to blame! I dare say the money is all ready to pay down. His Reverence would never run such a risk."

"He is treasurer for some of the 'societies,' isn't he, Samuel?"

"Of course he is; always has been. Now, Mary Ann,

all this is between you and me ; you are not to drop a word, mind ! ”

“ As if I should ! When did you ever know me go chattering, I wonder ! Women can’t keep secrets, they say—can’t they ? All I know is, *I am to be trusted.* ”

“ My dear,” replied the prudent husband, “ I know you are to be trusted, or I shouldn’t tell you everything, and consult you, as I do. There are few women like you ; that’s the worst of it. ”

And there this conversation ended ; and when anything was said about the unaudited accounts, Mr. Baxter assumed his most pompous, churchwarden-like aspect, and explained that all would be settled the very first day the Rector was well enough to meet the committee.

But something happened one bright December morning that rather surprised the astute Churchwarden. He burst in upon his wife, just as she was stirring her Christmas puddings, and debating within herself whether the mince-meat might not be all the better for another wine-glassful of brandy. “ Mary Ann, I want you. ”

“ You are always wanting me at the wrong time, Mr. B. Won’t it do after dinner, when I’m dressed and comfortable ? ”

“ No ! I’ve something to say to you, and after dinner I shall be busy with those letters. Never mind the pudding ; let Fanny and Lottie stir it—teach them to stir their own puddings by-and-by ! Come into the best parlour. ”

“ Now then, what is it ? ” asked Mrs. Baxter, as she took off her ample cooking-apron, and settled herself in her own Sunday chair. “ Make haste, or else the dinner will be ready ; and you don’t like the joint over-roasted, you know. I hope you haven’t been putting your name to a bill again, Mr. B. ! If you have, all I can say is, you did ought to be ashamed of yourself, a man of your years and experience, and the father of seven innocent babes ! ”

“ It’s nothing of the sort, my dear ; and I’m thankful to know that only two of our children can, by any stretch of imagination, be classed as ‘ babes. ’ Our youngest will be five on Valentine’s Day, and a fine little fellow, too, thank God. ”

“ *Will* you tell me, Mr. B., what is the matter ? I’ve

no time to waste, with all the Christmas fare, and the girls' and my new dresses and bonnets on my mind! You don't mean to say you've been and trusted young Hudson again for barley, or for anything else? I saw him talking to you this morning. He has never paid for his last lot, nor for the beans; and they do say he's furnished his house for his new wife as fine as fi'pence! And to see how *she* dresses!"

"My dear, you talk so fast I cannot possibly tell you my news. It's nothing to do with bills or with barley; it's just about the Rector."

"Dear me! Is he worse?"

"No! better in himself, Miss Martin says. I've just been talking to her. I went into the churchyard to see if Wicks had mended that gate properly, and there I saw Miss Martin walking with Miss Joan, just on the other side the hedge. And says she to me, quite affable-like, as she always is, 'Good morning, Mr. Baxter! Will you come into the laurel-walk and speak to me?' Of course I bowed and went, wondering what she wanted; and all of a sudden she began, 'There's that committee meeting, Mr. Baxter; can it not be held without the Rector?' I told her that it could easily enough, if somebody would represent him, and if the accounts were all ready and straightforward. And she made answer that the accounts were all right, and balanced to a halfpenny, and the money lying in the bank; and further still, that the Rector was beginning to be uneasy at his inability to do anything, duty or business; and she thought it would please him, if we all met in the vestry, with her and one of the young ladies, and settled the matter; paying over the Rector's cheque for the amount."

"A cheque may be worth what it represents, or it may be waste paper! I shouldn't care to hold Mr. Carisbroke's cheques, if I were you, Samuel."

"The money is there, you may depend upon it. She's not the woman to play tricks. It's all square, I'll go bail."

"Don't be too confident. *She* may think it's there! Something tells me it's *not*, nor never will be; so just you take care what you are about, Samuel Baxter, and don't be cheated by a parson and a woman."

"I should like to see the man *or* woman that got over Samuel Baxter, Mrs. B. Leave me to take care of myself. I'd trust Miss Martin to any amount. If she wanted a thousand quarters of best wheat on credit, I'd let her have it;—or beans, or barley, or aught else she asked for."

"Well! She is not likely to want any sort of stuff. She may be honest—I don't say she isn't. She goes in for cash-payments, I know, and pays over the counter, or on delivery; but she may be as straightforward as possible, and yet be no warranty for the Rector."

"May be,—may be not! Anyhow, we are all, that is the committee, to meet in the girls' schoolroom—we thought that would be better than the vestry—next Tuesday evening at seven o'clock, and there will be an end of the matter. I'm glad as glad can be that there won't be a mess. It would have gone to my heart to have had to tackle the Rector; but I'd have done my duty, if he'd been Archbishop of Canterbury."

"Well, all I can say is, I hope you are not deceived, and Miss Martin into the bargain. I shouldn't wonder if the Rector don't marry her after a time; she is quite the lady, and not at all bad-looking for her age."

"If all is true that is reported of the Rector, he won't marry anybody. He wants a nurse, rather than a wife, I'm afraid, poor man. They do say he will never come among us again."

"Really now! I hope that's not true. Folks do *exaggerate* so!"

A vice, or perhaps we should say foible, to which Mrs. Baxter was herself peculiarly addicted; but then, curiously enough, people who themselves exaggerate are sure to be the first to accuse others of the practice, when they have to listen to accounts, or reports, which they do not care to endorse.

"It's only too true, I'm afraid," replied the Churchwarden "Miss Martin herself seemed very down about him, and poor Miss Joan was ready to cry when we talked about her pa. She's growing quite a fine girl, is Miss Joan, tall and lissome; and when she's a bit older, and stopped running up like a kidney-bean, she'll be a fine figure of a young woman. And, bless me, what eyes she

has ! dark and large and clear, and what poets call 'full of soul,' I suppose, for they seem to be speaking to you. I'm sure when Miss Martin and me was a discoursing about the meeting, she looked me through and through, and seemed to be saying something, though she didn't speak a word."

"I think, Mr. Baxter, you might find something better to talk about to your own wife than young ladies' figures and eyes. It does not become the father of a family to go philandering after girls, old ones or young ones, neither. And churchwarden, too, as you've been these three years and more ! It's not respectable ; it's thoroughly scandalous."

"My dear," said the offended husband, curtly, "you may be a woman of sense, and a woman of parts—whatever that expression may mean—but like the rest of your sex, you've got your weaknesses, and yours is a foolish kind of jealousy, that can't abide to hear a word from me in favour of any other woman. And in this respect the older you get the worse you are. And I'll tell you what, Mary Ann, you're a good wife, and I should never have got on in the world half as well if I hadn't had a careful, thrifty, loving partner at my fireside ; but I'd rather have a slattern or a pretty simpleton than I'd be tied to a nagging, cross-grained, *jealous* woman. There, Mrs. B., them's my sentiments. You were the girl of my choice, as you are the wife of my heart this moment. But a man may be *tired out*, remember ! He may be the faithfullest husband as ever said 'I will' at the marriage-altar, and yet grow very weary when he's nagged at, and irritated, and argued with perpetual ! And nothing tries affection sooner than miserable jealousy !"

"They say there's no true love without jealousy !" sighed Mrs. Baxter, pathetically, through her tears.

"Who says so ? There's no *self-love* without jealousy, if you like ! Show me a jealous woman, and I'll show you a nasty, spiteful, ill-tempered, selfish vixen !"

"How can you be so unkind, Mr. B. ? I am sure I am not jealous ; it's the last thing that I am to be accused of. *Spiteful too !* And I never did any one a bad turn in my life ! *Selfish !* And I always carve, that I may give you

the kidney out of a loin, and the liver-wing of a fowl, instead of letting you put it on my plate, as I know you would, if you had the dish before you. To think *you* should give me such a character, after being your true, loving wife these eighteen years and over! But men *are* cruel; they never mind how they hurt a poor woman's feelings; they say things as goes to your heart, and then expect you to forget all about it, and smile and chatter as if no unkindness had been meant! I wish I were an old maid, I do!"

Mr. Baxter burst out laughing. He had had his little tantrum out, and it was over. He knew he had a good wife, and a faithful, affectionate wife, who in her heart of hearts thought her Samuel the best and noblest man that ever kept his five-and-fortieth Christmas. He had been rather severe upon "the weaker vessel," and he knew it. "Come, Polly," he said, walking across the room and taking her in his arms, "don't cry. I didn't say you were nasty and spiteful and ill-tempered, and all the rest of it! And I don't say you're *jealous*, only you are a little that way inclined, and I wanted to say a word of warning, for I don't and I won't hold to it, that a married man mustn't praise or admire any woman but his lawful wife! Bless you, child, I admire a lot of things I don't want and wouldn't have at a gift. You're the woman for me, and I wouldn't change for all the beauties in the world; but I stick to it, that I may say what I like to look at, and that I may esteem female wit and loveliness without being pitched into. And to think we've had this foolish quarrel—well! then, we won't call it quarrel—this little tiff, all through Miss Joan's black eyes and graceful figure."

"Perhaps I was a bit foolish. There! we won't say any more about it. Let's kiss and make it up."

And so they did; and Mr. Baxter went down into his wine-cellar, and brought up a cobwebby bottle of his choicest Madeira, which was kept for extraordinary occasions, because, as he told his girls, he thought ma' was overtired, and was just a peg too low, and he only hoped, when they had homes of their own, they would be as thoughtful to their husbands, and see to their comforts as their mother did to his! And that evening Mrs. Church-

warden Baxter got a present she had long coveted—a dazzling ring that she had admired for the last two years as it sparkled in the jeweller's shop window at Massington—real diamonds and emeralds! And it was the first valuable ring she had ever owned. Up to this particular evening she had rejoiced in a cheap turquoise ring, a cluster of pale blue stones, with a discoloured seed-pearl in the centre, supposed to typify a “forget-me-not.” *Item*, a garnet-ring, or something of the sort, which she had purchased for fifteen-and-sixpence in her maiden days; *item*, a coral half-hoop, from which a third of the gems were missing. *Now*, she could vie with Mrs. Burton and Mrs. Harding, and Mrs. Smith-Jones, and half-a-dozen other *mesdames*, who represented the upper middle-class at Perrywood! Mrs. Baxter was more than appeased; she kissed her portly Samuel in a rapture, and vowed that hers was the kindest and most generous husband in all the world! And she was further delighted when he told her this present of a ring should not interfere with the expected Christmas gift—a long-promised sable collar!

Yes! the long-adjourned meeting was really to be held; and those who had cherished hard thoughts of Mr. Carisbroke began to repent themselves of their want of charity. After all, he had not broken faith with his trusting parishioners; he had not steeped his soul in guilt for the sake of filthy lucre. *Meliora*, with the Rector's keys in her possession, had laid lawless hands on the papers relating to the Organ and Reredos Funds, and had discovered, to her great satisfaction, that the sum she had desired to be paid in to her account at a certain Cotswoldbury Bank was amply sufficient for the purpose. It remained only to come to an understanding with Mr. Carisbroke. The subject had not been mentioned between them since the commencement of his illness.

At first *Meliora* fancied he had partially, if not entirely, forgotten the transaction, for when alone with her he never, even vaguely, reverted to that which had been his crowning anxiety, although he touched occasionally upon his general and more patent difficulties. But as the days of convalescence, such as they were, went by, she began to perceive that something was weighing heavily on his

mind, and that, in spite of every care and ceaseless attention, he did not make the progress which Dr. Ingledew evidently expected. She feared, too, lest in the present state of affairs, any steps should be taken unknown to herself; and she determined, at any risk, to speak to the Rector, and arrange, if possible, for the conclusion of the business.

She had brought her work one morning to the invalid's side—it was an old dress of Mrs. Carisbroke's, which she was trying to rehabilitate for the wearing of one of the twins—and she began to talk about household matters in general, telling how economically she and the elder girls had been managing for the last few weeks, keeping down expenses to the lowest possible minimum, and yet not feeling mulct in any actual necessary of life.

"You are very good," he said, when she had finished her little story; "very good to me and mine, *Meliora*. I sometimes wonder what would have become of us had not God sent you to us in these days of our necessity. For I am learning, my dear, to take all benefits as from *His* hand, and, above all, your wonderful and unmerited kindness."

He often called her "my dear" now; but it was in an elderly, fatherly kind of way, as if she really were an eldest daughter. It was precisely the light in which she wished to be regarded, and it cleared away anything like the lingering shyness which might well have existed after those proposals in the library several months ago.

"I am glad you think I have been good," she replied, trying to speak mirthfully; then, more gravely, "But there is one thing I want you to consider, Mr. Carisbroke, if you don't mind very much—that question of the *money* which was to be paid over on behalf of the new schools from the Organ and Reredos Fund—don't you remember?"

"Could I forget! And yet for awhile, even after my senses returned, I had no distinct impression of the actual state of things. I half wondered whether, and yet dared not hope, that painful interview with Mr. Baxter was delirium, or only a bad dream. Too soon my mind cleared, my memory returned. I recalled his words, his looks, and all the shame and despair of that miserable

Sunday. I recalled, too, though somewhat dimly, my appeal to you that evening, before service, in the library. After that, all is a blank. For the last few days I have been trying to summon courage to return to—to a subject which, but for my own criminal weakness, would never have been. Tell me, Meliora, has the committee been called?"

"No; it was at once decided that business should be suspended so long as you remained an invalid."

"It is suspended, then, for the term of my natural life."

"I should have said, till you were sufficiently recovered to resume some of your duties."

"And am I so far sufficiently recovered, do you think?"

"Yes, and no! You are by no means fit to hold your own with Mr. Baxter, or to transact business outside this room, *personally*. But you can make a *locum tenens* of me, if you will only instruct me, and give me the proper authority. And, at once, to ease your mind, the money is all here, ready to be paid in, to the uttermost farthing!"

"Meliora! what do you mean?"

"Simply what I say. I have taken great liberties, I know; but under the circumstances, I thought I might be forgiven. I had your private keys, and hunted out the necessary papers, balanced them to the best of my ability—indeed, it was not much more than a case of compound addition. Then I wrote to my own man of business, and desired him to send to my credit, at Sloman's Bank, a certain sum of money. It has been there these three weeks."

"Your own money, Meliora?"

"Of course. Whose else should it be! You will have to give me a proper acknowledgment, that is all; and I shall be a merciful creditor."

"But how *can* I take your money—your savings? How impoverish the friend to whom I am already so deeply indebted?"

"I can very well spare it; I am richer than you suppose. I need not say the transaction is strictly private, and I trust to you never to let it be known, even to your own children."

"Meliora, you overwhelm me with kindness. Your generosity is almost more than I can bear. Perhaps I shall not even live to repay you."

"In that case the secret will die with me. Think no more about the loan or the lender, but tell me that I may speak to Mr. Baxter, and say you want this matter settled, and have appointed me to act on your behalf. All the rest I can arrange."

"I leave everything to you. I did not think this last bitter drop in my cup of sorrows would be spared me; but I humbly thank my God for His great and manifold mercies, and, next to Him, I thank you, Meliora, my friend."



CHAPTER XV.

RIVAL ACCOUNTS.

"Now's the day, and now's the hour,
See the front of battle lour."

THE Committee Meeting took place according to arrangement. Mr. Baxter was not the only one who felt extremely curious as to the result; so when the evening came, there was not one member of the committee who was missing. Exactly at seven o'clock, Miss Martin, with Joan Carisbroke at her side, entered the room, and took the seat which half-a-dozen gentlemen hastened to offer her. She waited for no preliminaries, but at once took from her bag two or three memorandum-books and a handful of papers, and laid them on the table.

"Here are, I believe," she said, in a clear, firm voice, "the ample and correct accounts of the two funds, which have, as you know, accumulated during the present year, paid in to the Rector at various times, and in different sums, partly by subscribers themselves, but to a large extent by the friends who were so kind as to take upon them-

selves the somewhat unthankful duties of collectors. Will Mr. Baxter compare these lists with his own, and then examine if the sum total be correct?"

Mr. Baxter and Mr. Green both brought out their separate bundles of accounts. Mr. Baxter's papers were neatly copied out, folded, docketed, and tied with orthodox red-tape; Mr. Green's were roughly scribbled, blotted, corrected and re-corrected, and carelessly rolled together. But they agreed one with the other to a fraction, for the two churchwardens had gone over them together the night before; in order, as they remarked, to be quite sure that all was right and indisputable, and also that there might be a sufficient check upon the Rector's "probable inaccuracies," Mr. Carisbroke having had for many years the reputation of being "no man of business!" Mr. Green and Mr. Baxter were so well up in these accounts, and had gone over the different lists so often, that it was now a mere formality calling out the names and casting up the amounts in public.

"What is your sum-total, gentlemen, may I ask?" said Meliora, as the two churchwardens respectively came to an end of these not very complicated calculations. Mr. Baxter looked at Mr. Green, and Mr. Green looked at Mr. Baxter, and there was some hesitancy as to which of them should be spokesman. Mr. Baxter finally adjusted his eye-glass, and looking once more up and down the pages, replied, "I make it exactly £327 17s. 6d. Mr. Green, what is your reckoning?"

"The same to a figure," was Mr. Green's response. "It's not likely there'd be a mistake with either of us! Both me and you, Mr. Baxter, has too good a ready-reckoner in our brains to go putting down a halfpenny over or under the precise amount. But I'd like Mr. Bland, or Mr. Jones, or both on 'em, just to cast up and see with their own eyes that we has it all right. There's nothing like making sure, and this here is public money, you see!—money we've got together for sacred purposes, and therefore a sacred and solemn trust."

Mr. Bland, thus appealed to, nervously caught hold of the sheets; but being painfully short-sighted, and having left his spectacles at home, it was difficult to believe that

his inspection was of any value. He appeared, however, to scan the columns most carefully, and was presently heard to declare that it was all, every bit of it, as right as a trivet!

Mr. Jones declined to re-audit the accounts. The exact sciences had been his stumbling block from earliest childhood. Some phrenologist had told him that he was painfully deficient in the organ of calculation, and he believed it. He never could learn his Tables, or Weights and Measures, like other lads of his age. He had accepted office only on the distinct understanding that he should not be bothered with units, tens, or hundreds, let alone thousands; but he could give sound advice as regarded architecture and ventilation, and he thought he knew a bit of good timber when he saw it. He therefore begged to be excused the totting-up of that little calculation.

Meliora sat perfectly quiet and calm. She had a thorough patrician control of herself, and no one gazing into her grave and tranquil countenance could ever have divined how cruelly her patience was taxed, and how much she longed to silence the voluble members of the committee. At one moment Joan declared they were all talking together—declaiming and protesting, rather. No *Ladies' Committee*, popularly supposed by the nobler sex to be a mere purposeless cabal and latest edition of Babel, could possibly have rattled away more irrelevantly, or with greater power of tongue. Mr. Baxter, as chairman, at length called to order, for Mr. Ficken and Mr. Jones had got to last night's discussion in Parliament; Mr. Bland was telling his next neighbour that a new comet, or planet, he wasn't sure which, had been discovered; and Mr. Green was expatiating on the state of the live-meat market, and rejoicing over some very fine "beasts" which he had just bought at a prime bargain!

On the motion of "the chair," order was resumed, and a dead silence followed. Meliora hastened to seize her opportunity. "My accounts—that is to say, the Rectory accounts, for several of us felt constrained to help Mr. Carisbroke—do not quite agree with yours, Mr. Baxter. There is a difference of some pounds in the sum-total." And Miss Martin laid her hand on the papers before her.

"I am sorry to hear that," said Mr. Baxter; something sadly like a flash of triumph illuminating his face. "I am very sorry, Miss Martin; perhaps, though, I can set the mistake to rights. Women are not generally the best of accountants, nor parsons either, for the matter of that! I wonder, now, why it is that parsons of all persuasions are such bad arithmeticians, and do business so terribly on the loose! Hand over your papers, Miss Martin; perhaps you have missed out one of the larger lists!"

But Meliora kept her hand firmly on her papers, while Mr. Green sneered, and grunted, "Never did suppose as they would agree! Didn't I tell 'ee so, Baxter? Ourn's the true account, and we can't sign no other; yourn must be made to square with ourn, miss, one way or 'nother."

"*Must it?*" was Meliora's cool rejoinder. "I do not myself see why it should."

"Ladies never do see things from a business point of view," began Mr. Bland, politely; but the butcher-churchwarden interrupted him. "If ladies," quoth he, "will mix 'emselfs up with what ain't no business of theirs, so to speak, and put their fingers in pies as is none of their makin', they mustn't complain if they is pulled up short. Business is business, all the world over; and when the fair sect volunteers and comes forrard, and takes the place of a man, she can't expect no more grace nor if she was a man. And if the Rector hisself was present, which it's a moral pity he ain't, we should feel it our bounden dooty to be as plain and outspoken with him as we should with each other as ain't in holy orders!"

Now this speech, which seemed intended vaguely to impeach the Rector's integrity, made Meliora's face glow; but she still sat proudly, with a mocking smile growing upon her lips, and her right hand firmly resting on her questionable accounts. Mr. Green, you must understand, was the butcher who served the Rectory with meat for many years; and his long-standing bill—only portions of which had been "paid to account" at uncertain intervals, had become by this time a little MS. volume. And hearing, of course, about the *sequestration*, which had quite ceased to be a dead secret, as it was at first, Mr. Green began to murmur that he would never get his

money. It would be a regular case of bankruptcy—"fraudulent bankruptcy," in his private opinion—and there would be, Heaven knew how much, in the pound for the creditors, three or four dividends of fourpence half-penny each, perhaps! not half enough to pay for the suet owing for, to say nothing of the sweetbreads and the gravy-beef and the legs of veal for white stock, which used to be ordered by departed cooks for the Rectory kitchen, regardless of expense. He was feeling very bitter against Mr. Carisbroke just then, and he had evidently shared his brother churchwarden's suspicions concerning those "fund and society moneys" which were in the Rector's keeping. Moreover, he bore Meliora a grudge; she had taken to ready-money payments of late, and finding that Mr. Green charged a penny a pound more than Mr. Cutlett, a young butcher who had not long since set up in business for himself in the Massington Road, she transferred her custom, especially as Mr. Green could be very insolent upon occasion, and frequently sent inferior joints to the Rectory.

Mr. Baxter interposed; he was not only more polished, and a notable "ladies' man," but he had a kinder heart and a more generous soul than the displeased butcher. But then, the sum total of Mr. Green's account came to *three figures*, and rather exceeded the full amount of subscriptions as endorsed by Messrs. Green, Baxter, and Co.; while Mr. Baxter's bill for hay, straw, and horse-corn, "though quite too much to lose," as he observed, and of long standing, was scarcely a fifth part of Mr. Green's. Nevertheless, I feel persuaded that no sort of bill could ever have made the corn-dealer so angry and so malicious as the butcher.

Once more Mr. Green extended his hand for Meliora's papers, and once more the lady smiled and silently ignored the motion. Mr. Baxter began to feel vexed. He had thought better of Miss Martin; what was the use of contesting such a point! the defalcations *must* come out; what did she gain by deferring the evil moment? She must know that the committee would not break up without a complete understanding of the actual state of the funds in question. Those lists must be balanced to the last farthing

that very night, and there and then, sitting round that baize-covered table. Certainly Miss Martin could go away and leave her accounts behind her; she had come of her own free will, and might depart at any instant; she had perhaps relied too fondly on her own powers of persuasion, on a certain cleverness which perhaps might turn eights into tens, and dozens into scores, or on the deference which should be paid to her by reason of her sex. But there could be no "cooking" of those accounts; no slurring over of inaccuracies; no sweeping item of "sundries," which should fully explain how there came to be *any* deficiency. There was scant mercy for the Rector—Meliora could see that—and very little forbearance for herself, as his not very welcome representative.

She would have liked to prolong the excitement, for the behaviour of "the enemy," while it secretly angered, amused her greatly; but she feared lest Joan, who had not yet learned thoroughly the great lesson of self-control, should explode, and give vent to one of those fierce orations of which, when strongly provoked, she was extremely capable, and which Meliora knew, from well-understood signs, was even now trembling on her lips. She gave her one arch smile and a sharp, brief squeeze of the hand, and addressed herself with all composure to the battle.

"Mr. Baxter," she said, coolly, "if our accounts differ, why should it not be yours rather than mine which are faulty?"

"Because," answered the Churchwarden, bluntly, "ours *can't* be wrong. We've taken every possible pains, and gone over and over every separate list, and, in fact, we may as well tell you that we *know* the exact sum which has been paid in to the Rector. It's of no earthly use to beat about the bush, and I didn't think as *you* would have lent yourself to it, Miss Martin!"

Still Miss Martin never flinched, though her colour deepened, and there was a strange light in her dark, expressive eyes. Her voice did not falter, and that curious smile lingered yet about her firm-set mouth, as she answered, "Is this then your ultimatum, gentlemen, that you refuse to pass my accounts because they do not tally with yours by a few pounds?"

"A few pounds! Say by how *many* pounds, and have done with it!" bawled Mr. Green, ready to seize Meliora's papers by brute force, and shake her bodily if she would not speak out.

"Any other woman would have burst into tears and made a scene," thought Mr. Baxter, admiringly. "What a fine plucky creature it is! A thousand shames that *she* should be an old maid! With a wife like her, a man might ride post-haste to the highest point of worldly ambition!" But alone with Mr. Green, who was no squire of dames, Meliora, I am afraid, would have fared but badly.

Her answer came clear and distinct. "By about twelve pounds."

"Now we understand," growled the butcher; "but that won't do, you know, ma'am! That twelve pounds, or '*about*,' as women always say, must be forthcoming."

"Is that inevitable?"

"*Of course* it is! These here are the true audited accounts!" slapping his own papers with great vigour, and placing them on the top of Mr. Baxter's. "We accept no other, and we can't help ourselves; we *must* make known the deficit."

"I am sure I have no objection, if you have not, Mr. Green. For my part, I should have said nothing about it, except to the Rector; and I am sure Miss Joan Carisbroke would have kept silence."

"Well! you are a queer one!" soliloquised the butcher, resting his stubbly chin on his large, coarse hand, and displaying to advantage the fine *Bristol* diamond on his little finger. "You do take it coolly, Miss Melia Martin! Well, now, I'll just tell 'ee; *we* have had our suspicions of this here all along. We didn't say nothing, seeing as the wisest may fall into mistakes *sometimes*; but we had our own thoughts, me and Mr. Baxter, and them there other gents, so it ain't a bit of use to go on playing your little game any longer, mum!"

"Now, really!" "Indeed, Mr. Green!" "Come, come!" protested Messrs. Bland, Jones, and Ficken, in full chorus. Though the Rector was already judged "guilty" in their minds, and though "Miss Melia Martin,"

as Green had dubbed her, might be his aider and abettor in iniquity, they had too much of manly spirit in them to sit still and allow a lady to be browbeaten, especially one whom they all, with a single exception, extremely admired. And Mr. Ficken added, "Indeed, Miss Martin, you had better give us your accounts without farther parley. Why prolong a painful scene?"

"Why, indeed!" said Meliora significantly. "I must say, Mr. Baxter, you gentlemen are all sadly illogical. Having allowed a particular idea to take possession of your thoughts, you cherish it till it becomes a settled conviction. Do let me remind you, Mr. Baxter, and Mr. Ficken, and all of you, who are behaving in such unbusiness-like fashion, that there are, at least, *two* sides to every question."

"Whatever do you mean, Miss Martin?" asked Mr. Baxter, almost faltering in his speech. The rest stared and wondered. Mr. Green felt that he could *not* stand it another minute; he *must* break out, and let the fire that burned within him have vent in language that no one could mistake.

Without another word, Meliora lifted her hand from the offending documents, and placed them before the chairman, saying, "There are our lists, Mr. Baxter, and that is our sum-total. Yours, I think, is £327 17s. 6d. ? *Ours*, you perceive, is exactly £340. And since you have so strongly and unmistakably repudiated these accounts, I cannot, of course, hand over this cheque for the full amount here specified. I paid the money into the bank to-day, myself, by order of Mr. Carisbroke. What is to be done? Shall we return the overplus of £12 2s. 6d. to the donors? The Rector cannot, of course, retain it, nor can *you*, after what has been declared. Let this teach you, gentlemen, not to be over-confident."

It is impossible to describe the amazement of the whole committee. Mr. Green, who sat at the chairman's right hand, began himself to overhaul the papers. Yes; it was all right; if there was a deficiency, it was of their own showing, not of Miss Martin's. Again there was a dead silence, broken only by sundry *hem's* and *ha's*, while the documents went the round of the table, and Meliora

leaned back in her chair with a satisfied smile upon her face.

"Are you content, gentlemen?" she asked softly, when at length the much-contemned accounts returned to the chairman. "Can I be legally punished for not making my accounts tally with yours? That unlucky twelve pounds odd—or, as I said, '*about*'—shall we give it to the poor of the parish; or what *shall* we do with it?"

"Really, Miss Martin," said Mr. Baxter, with a heightened complexion, "we all, I am sure, ask your pardon. But why did not you explain on which side the error lay?"

"How could I? You never asked whether my sum-total exceeded or fell short. You took it for granted that there was a deficit! You at once assailed me; very harshly, I shall always think! You seemed to have no doubt but that the Rector, his daughters, and myself had combined to cheat the subscribers. Mr. Green went so far as to *threaten*!"

"If you had only spoken just one word," urged Mr. Bland; "if you only called out, '*I make it twelve pounds more!*'"

"I never do call out, Mr. Bland; I strongly object to impulsive speeches of any kind. Besides, you see, I knew that my papers were correct; that yours, for all the bluster made about them, could *not* be passed, so I could well afford to bide my time. I assure you, gentlemen, you have been the source of infinite amusement to Miss Joan Carisbroke and to myself. I shall never forget the curious dilemma of this evening. I really think a comic play might be composed from it, to be entitled '*The Perrywood Mystery.*' What do you think, Mr. Bland and Mr. Ficken?"

"I am afraid, Miss Martin, we should all cut but very poor figures, while you would bring down the house," returned Mr. Ficken, who was much addicted to dramatic performances. "I am afraid, too, some of us might have been a little more courteous; some of us have shown neither patience nor gallantry, nor perhaps as much charity as might have been expected from a respectable Church of England committee. But you have your revenge, Miss Martin; *you* are mistress of the situation,

while we are compelled to own that our boasting was all vain. You are *victrix*, while we are discomfited—nay, altogether routed! Mr. Baxter, won't you apologise in *all* our names, and thankfully accept what this lady styles 'the Rectory accounts'?"

"That I will!" cried Mr. Baxter, with sudden effusion. "Miss Martin, we are all of us downright ashamed of ourselves. *I am*, I know; and I think I may venture to speak for the whole lot. Deary me, when I remember the things we *said*! You see the grand mistake was our rushing at once to a foregone conclusion; when you said the accounts didn't tally, somehow it never come into our stupid heads that it was we who were the defaulters, so to speak. In the name of this here meeting, then, Miss Martin, I humbly ask your pardon, and thank you for the overplus—that—that really we've *no* claim to, after what we said over and over again, and not too politely, either. You see, we thought, we foolish men, that we had got you in a regular fix. Now, it turns out that you had all the while the whip-hand of us! I only wish my wife was here, for she would say a deal better than I can, how much more sensible than the mankind are the womenkind—and I don't mean it sarcastically-like! I've almost made up my mind, Miss Martin, never to have any sort of a contest with a woman while I live. For why? I'm sure and certain to be beaten!"

"I don't know," shouted Mr. Green; "and I'm not sure that I'm to be taken into your apology. She behaved *like* a woman—let us run our heads agen a post, and then laughed at us because we got bumped! I say she behaved altogether as—a *woman*!"

"Would you have had me behave otherwise, Mr. Green?" asked Meliora, with difficulty putting on a serious countenance. "Should I have donned the masculine garments—metaphorically speaking, of course?"

"No, miss," returned the butcher, sulkily; "but you should have kep' your place. You should not have come among us at all."

"*But*! Mr. Green, what could be done in such a case? The Rector is too ill to leave his room, or to receive any one outside his own household; Mr. Frank Carisbroke

absolutely refused to have anything to do with the affair. It only remained for the women to do their best. As a woman of mature years, of some experience of the world, and of a courageous disposition, it seemed only in the fitness of things that I should represent the whole family. I therefore consented to be the mouthpiece of the Rector, and Miss Joan Carisbroke is here as the representative of her sisters."

"I am sure," responded the chairman, "that I include Miss Joan Carisbroke in my apology. Miss Joan, if I have said a word to hurt your feelings, I humbly beg your pardon."

"Which I heartily grant," replied Joan, speaking fearlessly for herself. "My feelings have been hurt a good deal since I came into this room, but I will try to believe it all came through misapprehension, and not through personal ill-feeling. Only, I do think people should be *quite* sure they are in the right, before they speak so hardly, and before they work themselves up into a fit of obstinacy. I think—I shall always think—Mr Green has behaved very badly, especially towards Meliora—I mean Miss Martin. I hope he is satisfied now that 'her little game,' or *our* little game, was not altogether so disgraceful as he supposed."

"You should have spoke out, Miss Joan!" retorted the surly butcher. "You should both have spoke, and not led us into speaking things as were quite beside the mark. How was we to guess as you'd got ahead of us, so to speak?"

"The mistake, I must confess, was ours—chiefly mine and Mr. Green's," said Mr. Baxter. "We forgot the two lists from Kiteley and Rastrick End; those two, which somehow slipped our memories, would have made us pretty equal, I imagine. Miss Martin and Miss Joan, 'tis you as were the women of business, after all! My colleagues and me must sing small, and trust to your generosity not to be too hard upon us."

Mr. Green, having nothing more to say, gnawed his square thumbs and growled inwardly, very much like a bear-cub that cannot get its own sweet, bearish way. "Umph!" he said at last, "it's a rum go, this here—a

very rum go! and I'm of opinion we ain't got to the bottom of it yet. Some things seems what they isn't, and some things isn't what they seems. But you're a very clever woman, Miss Meliora Martin; I don't say nothing to the contrary."

Meliora smiled, but made no reply. Her work was done, and she was tired and anxious to leave the committee. So she handed over the Rector's cheque for £340, received a proper acknowledgment from Messrs. Baxter and Green, and gracefully wishing all present "good-night" withdrew. And thus ended the long-adjourned committee meeting of "The Perrywood Organ and Reredos Funds."

CHAPTER XVI.

AFTER SUPPER.

"God lays an open book before
His little children's eyes;
They must not turn the pages o'er,
But read them and grow wise;
One only can they understand—
The page laid open by God's hand.

"The books are interleaved throughout
With ciphered leaves, and white;
Alternate pages they must read,
Alternate pages write;
The cypher of each book is known
To God and to one child alone."

"MELIORA! how *did* you keep your temper in that room and with those odious people?"

"I am afraid, Joan, I did not keep my temper, for I felt once or twice absolutely enraged! I could with the utmost pleasure have boxed the large red ears of that insolent butcher."

"You controlled your feelings, then, most wonderfully;

except that now and then your face glowed, and your eyes sparkled, no one could have perceived anything extraordinary in your manner. You sat there as calm and cold as if you were receiving compliments, and let that vulgar man have his say; I longed to dash in, and speak *my* thoughts."

"I am very glad you did not. If you are to be happy, if you are to be useful in this world, if you are to exercise any influence for good, if you are to do God's work in any sort of way, you must learn perfectly the grand lesson of self-restraint, my dear Joan. Equally, as a Christian, and as what is called a 'woman of the world'—that is, a woman who knows what prudence, courtesy, and the rightful claims of society demand of her—it is your duty, a duty compulsory in every point of view, to cultivate and steadily practise self-command, in word and deed."

"I know I am the impulsive one of the family."

"Therefore, the greater need for strict restraint—a restraint which no one but yourself can impose upon you. There are hundreds of lessons, Joan, which I cannot teach you, which you must learn for yourself in the great school of Experience."

"After all, the best teacher, is she not?"

"The very best! But, oh, how costly! And she *will* have docile and apt pupils. Those who deride her counsels, and carelessly or obstinately reject her teachings, either learn their lesson at last in pain and tears, or else learn it too late for their own advantage."

"At that rate, one's education is never finished."

"It never is, never will be, in this state of existence. I am continually feeling how very incomplete is my own training. I have been at school, and I have learned many a lesson since I came to Perrywood. God is the great Schoolmaster, Joan, and Experience is His head teacher;—stern and inexorable oftentimes, because the children idly shirk their tasks, or having once partially learned, carelessly forget them altogether. It is a trite saying, you know, 'We are never too old to learn'; it is quite as trite if we add, 'Refusing to learn, it is never too late to suffer.'"

"Meliora, I should so much like to know, if you

don't mind, that is—what lessons you have learned from us."

"I will tell you. I have learned the great lesson of humility. I came here proud and confident in my own strength; I have seen how even good people may fall and come to shame. I have learned to say, day by day, with a passion of earnestness I never felt before—'*lead us not into temptation*'! And I say to myself, 'Why has God kept *me* from the evil? Why have I been allowed to stand upright, when so many have strayed and stumbled? Why have I not been 'confounded,' since I have walked in my own ways, gloried in my own wisdom, trusted—not in God, but in myself?'"

"But have you, Meliora? You have always taught me to pray to God for help and guidance, and deliverance from evil! Yet, now I come to think of it, your teaching of late has been very different from what it used to be. You say less of self-respect, proper pride, and common-sense, and more of trust in God; more of His Spirit's teachings; more of doing what Christ would have us do!"

"I am very glad, dear, that you have felt it to be so; for what God, as I believe, teaches me, it is my strong desire to teach to you, as far as I am able. But I have learned another lesson or two, I hope. I think I am less stern and harsh than I used to be; less severe on others' failings; less inclined to *judge* my neighbour; less given to setting myself up as a standard of righteousness and wisdom. I am of a gentler spirit, I hope; I am less satisfied with myself, and it pleases me to make allowances for others when they fall or stumble. These, I trust, are truly the lessons I have learned at Perrywood."

"I think you are the best woman in the world, Meliora, as well as the wisest."

"I hope there are many, very many, much better than I am, Joan! Woe to this generation, and, alas! for the world that God has so loved, if it be not so! But, my dear, we will not talk any more about ourselves; it is a bad habit to get into, and fosters pride and selfishness, and sooner or later makes us disagreeable to our neighbours. There are times when it is good to speak out of one's inner

life, but they do not frequently occur: the person who habitually discourses about his or her maladies of body or of soul is a person to be avoided."

"I do so want to see your sisters, Meliora. Are Mrs. May and Mrs. Clarke at all like yourself?"

"Not in the least! Claudia is one of the brightest and bonniest creatures I know; and Maud—well, you must know Maud in order to appreciate her. If you had called *her* the best woman in the world, you would not have been so far wrong. All the goodness that is in me I owe to Maud, though she is eight years younger than myself."

"And she is a widow, I think you said?"

"Yes; she has one dear little girl. Her married life was a very short one. But I was going to tell you about Mrs. Tabitha Gray, a good old lady who had 'known better days.' It was chiefly through Maud's influence that she was elected to her little cottage, with its weekly allowance and its yearly gifts, and it came to be a sort of institution that one of us should pay her a visit every Thursday. One day, I went and found her as usual in the *dumps*! Tabby was very fond of proclaiming herself as '*de profundis*'; it pleased her to tell people that she was 'very low indeed!' After we had chatted a little about the weather, she began to bewail her own sinfulness and utter vileness, expatiating largely on her innate depravity, and being nothing worth; till I grew very tired of the oft-told tale, and being not quite as merciful then as I hope I am now, I resolved, if I could, to teach her a lesson. Said she: 'Oh! I am a miserable sinner, all filth and rubbish! There isn't a bit of good in me, not a bit! I count myself the lowest of the low; the poorest of the poor; my heart is full of iniquities!'

"Now, instead of comforting her with Scripture promises, and telling her she thought too badly of herself, I put on a very serious face, and said, 'I am sorry to hear it, Mrs. Tabitha; do you know, I quite thought you were a Christian woman! Isn't it time you tried to mend your ways?' She shook her head, and replied that we couldn't mend our own ways unless God helped us. To which I answered, 'True enough; but why don't you ask God's help? Has He not promised to help all who come to

Him in humility? Am I to conclude that He will not hear *you*, or that you have not prayed to Him?' She moved uneasily on her chair, and looked at me, almost severely. 'You don't understand,' she said; 'you have never felt your own deep depravity.' 'Oh, yes, I have,' I answered; 'but I do not desire to speak of myself; it is *your* depravity that we are talking about, and I am truly sorry to find that you are so much worse a person than I thought you to be.'"

"What did she say?"

"Nothing much then; but next time I saw her she confessed that I was right, and Maud tells me she has not publicly bewailed her own vileness and depravity since."

"But should not one bewail one's sins?"

"*Bitterly!* But not in common conversation, and in such parlance as must lead any sensible person to conclude that we should not quite like to be taken at our word; for I have always found, Joan, that the people who are most given to heaping abusive epithets on themselves, and volubly proclaiming that they are the chief of sinners, are those who are content never to make progress in the Christian life. They make confession—that is, general confession; but there they stop. They cry aloud that they have no strength of their own, that they can do nothing in their own strength—which is true enough, of them, of you, of me! But they never seem, judging by results, to seek that strength which alone can lift them above their miserable selves. There is no greater mistake than to think that confession is the sum of godliness; for confession is *not* repentance, though it is certainly inseparable from it."

"Repentance means being sorry for sin, does it not?"

"Of course it does, to a certain extent; for unless you are sorry for your sin, you are not likely to renounce it. But our Lord did not say to the guilty woman in the Gospel, 'Go, and be very sorry—Go and weep, and mourn in sackcloth and ashes!'"

"No! He said, 'Go, and sin no more.' Yet, *Meliora*, St. Paul called himself the 'chief of sinners.'"

"That, I believe, was in connection with his persecution of the Church. There came a time when he said, 'I

have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.' What use would Paul's life have been to the world, what glory to his Master, if he had stayed where he was the day after his conversion? Paul looked upon the Christian life as a 'course'—a 'race'! And in a race we press forward to the goal; we do not look behind; we *strive* for the victory. What should we think of one who undertook to run a race, and stopped short a few yards beyond the starting-point bewailing his own weaknesses? It is a great thing to start, but it is not enough, by any means. 'Well begun is half finished,' people say, and that is perfectly true; but the best beginnings are failures, if there is no finish to them."

"Meliora, how long have you felt all this?"

"Not so long as I might have felt it, if I had only been anxious to learn the lessons that God Himself was teaching me. I learned best and most, Joan, in the Valley of Humiliation. I never, so fully as I do now, recognised my own weakness; for as my soul would rise, she is weighed down by 'the body of this death.' But is not that all the more reason why I should press onward, seeking daily for strength *not* my own; seeking for the wisdom which is from above, yearning after the purity of those who shall see the Lord even as He is! Standing still and making one's moan aloud never yet brought any Christian nearer to the blessed end of the course where God is waiting to receive and crown those who are 'faithful unto death.'"

"Still, sometimes it is a comfort to make one's moan!"

"Then make it to God! And there may be hours when it is expedient to speak freely of oneself to a fellow-creature. But don't, while you are young, get into a habit of talking about yourself in a general, cursory sort of way. Don't fancy that abusing yourself in common conversation is the mark of a spiritual mind. Either you don't mean it *really*, or you are dreadfully behindhand in the Christian course; or, worse still, have never yet made a genuine start! And now, Joan, are you tired?"

"Not at all. My supper has given me fresh strength and spirits. But I will go to bed, if you think I ought.

It vexes Netta and Brenda when they know I sit up after them."

"They are fast asleep; I have been to their room. We need not let them know you did not quickly follow them; besides, it is not late, and I want to talk to you a little—indeed, I asked you to come here that we might have some special conversation, and then we managed to get upon other subjects than those I intended to introduce. Joan dear, have you thought of what is going to become of us all? I put myself among you, you see!"

Joan started. "What is to become of us, Meliora? We are going to be very poor, I know; but there will be enough to live upon humbly and economically, will there not?"

"It will have to be very humbly, and very economically, my dear. I think you and I had better look the future in the face."

"With all my heart. First of all, what *have* we got?"

"Less—far less than I had hoped for, my dear. Your poor father, yesterday, was trying to make some calculations, but the effort was too much for him; he became so much worse that Nurse Barnard called me to him, and I took the papers from him, and promised to look into them myself. Your father, my dear, will never again, I am much afraid, be able to attend to his own affairs as the head of the family should."

"And yet he is much better! You should have seen how he enjoyed that partridge to-day! And he has made quite a hearty supper, Lavinia says. Surely a good appetite is one of the best signs."

"So far as the general health is concerned, I suppose it is. But I had some talk with Dr. Ingledew yesterday, and he fears—nay, he is almost certain—that the Rector will never be any better than he is now."

"Never walk about again? Never do duty in the church any more?"

"Never, I am afraid."

"What has caused it—the fever?"

"Partly, perhaps; but *you* know how great was the shock he sustained that day, when Mr. Baxter came in from the churchyard. Then, he would go into the

pulpit that night, he would strive against the painful sensations that were all but overpowering him; and the struggle was more than he could bear. He must have suffered as much in those few hours, Joan, as men sometimes suffer in a whole lifetime. Dr. Ingledew says it was a most merciful insensibility; it must either have been *that* or loss of reason—perhaps of life.”

“Dr. Ingledew does not know what we have agreed never to talk about?”

“No, dear, not in the least. But he does know what half the county knows, that matters have come to extremities with the Rector of Perrywood, and that the living is actually sequestered. To the anxiety naturally resulting from this he attributes this melancholy illness. And of course every trouble has had a hand, so to speak, in the catastrophe.”

“How did it all come about? I know we have been living fearfully beyond our means always. I know that there were money difficulties even before I was born. I know, too, that there were borrowings on all sides—that to get quit of one debt that pressed, another and a still heavier one was contracted. But then, papa and mamma were well off, tolerably rich.”

“Twice their income would not have borne the demands made upon it. Unfortunately, there was some flaw in the settlement which secured your mother’s property to herself, so that she was able to realise from time to time such portions of the principal as seemed expedient to herself. Debts were paid off, of course, and it seemed an easy way to set matters straight; but then the annual income itself became smaller, and the retrenchments which ought to have resulted seem never to have been considered necessary. At any rate, they were never made; and again and again the private property was alienated—Frank’s liabilities having very much to do with it for the last two years—till more than two-thirds were gone, and what remains may possibly be imperilled.”

“Do you know at all what is really left, *Meliora*?”

“About two hundred a year, I believe; little, if any, more.”

“We can live upon that, surely? How many people

have to do with much less, and yet maintain a respectable appearance !”

“True. But all these cases are comparative. Two hundred a year would be affluence to some excellent people I have known ; only they were inured to penury ; they were accustomed to scant, plain living ; they had always looked twice at a sixpence before they spent it. And even a small amount of debt meant to them speedy ruin and disgrace. With you—all of you, as a family, I mean—it is far otherwise. You have none of you—except, perhaps, yourself—any just idea of the value of money. Your elder sisters, though greatly distressed at the state of affairs, which can be ignored no longer, have no notion of that most necessary process which is called ‘cutting your coat according to your cloth.’ Then there are six girls of you, and Frank, whose expenses are tenfold those of all his sisters put together.”

“And six girls cannot be fed, and clothed, and housed for nothing ! Meliora, there must be ways in which girls—*young ladies*—can earn money ?”

“Somebody must earn money, Joan ; two hundred per annum will never serve for eight people—one of them a helpless invalid, needing, really needing, all the ameliorations that wealth can give—one a babe in arms ; and one a prodigal who will not own himself in the wrong. Then there are the overwhelming debts ! Joan dear, do I hurt you too much ? Is it more than you can bear ?”

“No, no ! It hurts me, but I *must* bear. And I want to look it all in the face. Go on, Meliora, let me know the worst.”

“I think you do know it, dear ; that is, as far as I know it myself, and your father has reposed in me the utmost confidence.”

“Then there are Frank’s liabilities.”

“Frank is of age, and he had his allowance. He must be responsible for his own debts, and he must immediately find some employment. That a strong, healthy, educated young man should be dependent on a father impoverished and invalided for life is nothing less than monstrous ! We must never expect any help from Frank, but we have a right to insist upon his supporting himself.”

"And he is so expensive in his habits; he grumbles at the early dinner, at the small quantity of wine that comes up from the cellar, at Sarah's waiting, at everything that is not exactly to his taste, and in keeping with past circumstances. Then he smokes the cost of several good dinners weekly; he makes the same fuss about his boots as when we kept a whole staff of servants. He was saying only yesterday what a raw girl Sarah was, and I told him she was leaving this week. He seemed much to approve of her departure; but when I said we did not think of hiring any one to fill her place, he grew furiously angry, and began to swear, and abuse you; so I came away."

"Joan, I am quite willing to do all I can for all of you, and I have vowed to myself never to desert your father or his children while they need help and comfort; but I do not wish to take the executive entirely in my own hands. Frank thinks, or affects to believe, that I am usurping what should be Lavinia's place. I propose that we should hold a family council. The twins may be present for form's sake, though they cannot possibly have a voice in the arrangements to be made. The great question is, Will it be possible to meet together, and discuss matters in your father's presence? We must consult Dr. Ingledew."

"If we could talk everything over rationally and amicably, it would be our very best course, I am certain; and if it could be in papa's presence, so much the better. His voice would be the only authority which Frank could not disclaim. It is a very good idea, Meliora. Yes; let us hold a family council, with papa, if possible, in the chair. You must be the chief speaker. And it should be soon, I think; we should not delay."

"We *cannot* delay, Joan; our affairs are in the hands of those who will make short work of them. It is simply insane to go on as we are a day longer than can be helped."

"What did you mean by the remainder of poor mamma's fortune being *imperilled*?"

"Simply this: a great part of the principal has been alienated from the whole, plainly proving that the settle-

ment, which ought to have tied your mother's seventeen thousand pounds securely upon herself and her children, is worth nothing in the eyes of the law. The creditors can, I am greatly afraid, claim every penny that remains."

"They would never be so cruel—so unjust!"

"We could scarcely say they were *unjust*, my dear, for the money they seek is really owed to them, and has been owing for I do not know how long. I can excuse Mr. Green somewhat, when I see that his bills have not been paid in full for many years; his accounts have run on till the sum total is really frightful. Your father actually, at this moment, owes Mr. Green, for butcher's meat, more than four hundred pounds."

"Is it possible? What a quantity of meat we must have eaten!"

"A household such as this *has been*, conducted on the most liberal, not to say reckless, scale, consumes an immensity of everything. Butcher's meat is a grand item, of course; but everything else seems to me to have been in full proportion. The fishmonger's bill is something stupendous. Poor Lavinia cried herself ill when she saw it; but she owns that it cannot be disputed. *Nothing* has been paid to Mrs. Perch at Massington, nor to Mr. Dory at Cotswoldbury, for at least three years; and there is a balance from every preceding year, for I cannot say how long. As for the wine merchant's account, it is simply frightful! And all the rest are equally startling."

"We had so many servants before mamma died, and no one ever thought of keeping them at all in check. Then the garden and the grounds wanted ever so many men; and I know the vineries and the pinery cost ten times more than they ever brought in. I heard papa say that all his grapes were worth ten shillings per lb. to him at least; and the actual price of each pine and melon he would not mention! Then, long bills were run with the drapers and milliners and upholsterers; Lavinia and Maggie, as they grew up, ordered what they liked, regardless of expense; they were not to blame, they were brought up to it, and never dreamed they were acting wrongly. I should have done just the same, I do not doubt, in two or

three years' time, if no earthquake had happened, and you had not come to teach me practical honesty and common sense. Yes, Meliora, we will hold this family council *to-morrow*, if it be possible, and till then we will take a rest, and commend ourselves to God."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FAMILY COUNCIL.

"Work, Tibet! work, Annot! work, Margerie!
Sew, Tibet! knit, Annot! spin, Margerie!
Let us see who will win the victory."

"If any will not work, neither shall he eat."

MELIORA had not seen the Rector after her encounter with the committee; it was reported that he was very much tired and seemed inclined to sleep; she therefore judged it best not to pay him a visit till the morning, merely sending a message by Maggie, who was just then in attendance, to the effect that they had done very well without him, and that the business of the evening was satisfactorily concluded. He would understand, she knew; and she did not just then feel at all disposed to sit by the couch of the invalid and answer his questions, and listen to the outpourings of his mingled gratitude and remorse.

In the morning, when dinner was arranged for and the twins set to work at some easy lessons, she went to his room. But on her way thither she was met by Mr. Frank Carisbroke, coming down in his usual *déshabille* to breakfast. If compelled, *nolens volens*, to dine early, at what he termed "a most vulgar and barbarian hour," he made up for it, to the best of his ability, by breakfasting as late as his appetite would allow. Meliora turned back to remove the comestibles from the fender to the table; the young gentleman was in a very sulky mood, and about as amiable

as a bear in the typical temper which is, as a rule, justly or unjustly, ascribed to Bruin.

"This coffee is as cold as *ice*," he growled, as he put down the cup with a grimace; "and what do you call this stuff? it's neither ham nor bacon nor chine, nor anything fit for human food."

"Then don't eat it."

"I don't like it; it's oily with stewing before that hot fire. I say, Meliora, can't I have a devilled kidney, or something or other that's toothsome?"

"No, Mr. Frank, you cannot. We have given up breakfast kidneys and sweetbreads, and every sort of luxury. Besides, Nancy is not good at devilling; she is not a professed cook, you must understand, and if anything out of the common way is required, we do it ourselves. That coffee will be *really* cold, if you do not drink it. I am sorry you do not like the hock, which your sisters and I enjoyed very much, almost three hours ago; you must make up with bread and butter; or shall Joan get you a little hot toast? We shall dine at half-past one."

"I wonder you don't dine at half-past twelve! And what is there for dinner, may I ask?"

"We shall have three courses to-day."

"That sounds promising! What is the bill of fare?"

"Soup! pea-soup of my own manufacture. I can warrant its excellence. That is the first course. The second is cold mutton, the remains of yesterday's hot joint, with mashed potatoes; you may have some pickles, if you like—there are plenty in the house, and Netta and Brenda will be glad to join you. Third course, treacle roly-poly!"

"Miss Martin!" and Frank tossed off his luke-warm coffee, and pushed away his plate in irrepressible disgust, "I really should like to know what you are after."

"I am 'after' seeing your father at present, as I find I cannot contribute to your comfort; then I want to make ready the pigeon and the sweet omelette for his dinner, and I have certain sollicitudes about the soup, which no one but myself thoroughly understands. Joan can manage the roly-poly."

"You are a very odd sort of governess, Meliora. Instead of sitting in the schoolroom keeping the children

to their lessons, you cook the dinner, and you give lessons in cookery, moreover, I believe?"

"I am proud to say I do, Frank Carisbroke. Till lately I was out of practice myself, but now I am getting my hand in again nicely, and my pupils, especially Joan, improve steadily."

"Why not have a capable cook, who knows what's what? In my mother's time no one kept a better table than we did."

"I will answer your question. A capable cook asks high wages and naturally expects them, and the family exchequer being almost empty, it is requisite to practise the severest economy. Credit, also, there is none! Soup, fish, *entrées*, game, and all the rest of it, are therefore out of the question. An empty purse and good dinners, such as you think worthy of your attention, are as incompatible as hedge-roses and winter snow."

"I suppose you'll expect us to eat liver-and-bacon next?"

"A very good idea! I have a capital recipe for liver-and-bacon. I'll try it; thank you for putting me in mind of a cheap, favourite, relishing dish."

"You are not in earnest, of course; you must draw the line at *cats'-meat*! And I'll tell you what it is, Meliora—I won't stand this nonsense any longer; it's all *rot* about there being no money in the house—it must be, so you need not try to impose upon me any more. It's all very fine to be queening it over us in this style, giving us just what dinners *you* please, and shutting up the wine-cellar, and making drudges of my sisters! But you've gone a bit too far, madam! and as head of the family, while the governor is invalided, I'll just trouble you to 'hook it,' and leave us and our property to ourselves."

"Are you mad, Frank?" said Meliora, with just a little trembling in her voice. "Do you suppose I remain here for my own advantage? Do you think I bear your continual insolence from any fear of *you*? Let your father or your sisters say one word to me such as you have said, and I wash my hands of you all, and leave you to sink or swim, *if* the last be possible. And now you have roused me to speak my mind very fully as regards yourself. Sir,

I regard your presence under this roof as an insult to myself, and a disgrace to your sisters; what are you but a profligate, an idler, a dead weight upon the parent whom you have helped so largely to reduce to penury. You call yourself a man, and you are content to live upon the poor pittance which remains for the girls, and your sick father who cannot work! Shame on you, Frank Carisbroke!"

"Come, come, Meliora, don't cut up so rough; I spoke hastily. But surely I have as much right here as you have! Surely I have as much claim to eat and drink at my father's board as yourself! If I am sponging on the family resources, the miserable pittance you talk of, so are you! You don't pay for your board, I suppose?"

"I decline to answer questions which you have no right to put. My conscience acquits me of any sort of dependence; if I choose to share the fallen fortunes of your house, that is no business of yours. I will talk no longer with you. All I have to say now, is—go, and sin no more; eat the bread of idleness no longer; be a blessing, not a curse, to your unfortunate family."

"I am the most miserable fellow alive!" responded Frank, bursting into tears. "I know I am a wretch! But it's not my own fault, altogether; I was brought up to enjoy myself, and to be a gentleman! Now I am taunted with being a pauper, and am told to go out into the world and earn a living! You needn't trample upon a man when he is down, Meliora."

"God forbid that I should trample upon you, or upon any other unfortunate person. Go, and work—then I may, perhaps, respect you; let your future, so far as may be, blot out your past. You are sorry, you say? You repent of your folly? So far, so good; but remember, the repentance which is unaccompanied by reformation is nothing worth; it is spurious, displeasing to God, and despised by man."

"But what *can* I do, Meliora? I have not yet made up my mind as to my profession. I suppose it is of no use thinking any more of the Church? No! you needn't look in that way. I don't want to be a parson—I own I am not good enough. I've thought of being a barrister; I fancy I've rather a turn for pleading and speechifying. What do you advise?"

"Frank, are you pretending to be a fool, or are you really one? You might have entered any profession you chose; but you have thrown away your advantages, and they have left you for ever. You must be content now with lowly work; you must humble yourself to take whatever you can find to do."

"I should think there must always be clerks wanted at Somerset House, or at the Horse Guards, or somewhere. I shouldn't mind being in a Government office."

"You will have to wait many a weary year, Frank, before you get a Government appointment. Meanwhile, you will starve, for your father cannot, if he would, maintain you. You must be less ambitious."

"I couldn't mix myself up with cads of tradesmen, you know. Indeed, I would work, if there was any mortal thing a gentleman could do. What *can* I do, Meliora?"

"*Do!* Frank Carisbroke, you make me scorn you, in spite of myself. I am glad you are not a woman; you would reflect so much dishonour on the sex. What can you do? Fifty things, rather than remain a despicable idler! Go and sweep a crossing! wheel coal! turn hewer of wood, and drawer of water! do anything that is honest and lawful, rather than be any longer a burden upon those whom you have impoverished and disgraced."

"Meliora, you are very hard upon me."

"You make me so, Frank. There is such a thing as *righteous* indignation; one may be angry and sin not. I would—I *will*—do anything in my power to help you; but your unworthy conduct, your weakness, your unmanliness, revolts my very soul."

"Give me a few pounds—lend them, I mean; and I'll pay them back with full interest—compound interest, as much per cent. as you please—as soon as ever my luck turns. I will indeed, Meliora. Forgive the foolish things I have said. I know you are our best friend."

"What would you do with a few pounds?"

"I would go to London; it's the only place in the world to get on. I should be sure to jump into a berth there, and I should enjoy my life."

"Yes; in a grovelling sort of way, that would sink you even lower than you are at present. Employment of the

kind you seek is no more plentiful in London than in Cotswoldbury, except you take to your work an earnest desire to do your duty to the utmost, qualifications for the post you would fill, and last, not least, good references, both as regards your private character and your business abilities. London is a happy place to those who are happy in themselves; it is the most miserable abode in the world to those who are in themselves unhappy. To be alone in London, and not only alone, but poor and friendless as well—I can imagine no sadder lot. The good Lord pity all such unfortunates!”

“You are a Job’s comforter, *Meliora*; but I am sure if I were once in London I should find some employment. Only give me the chance, and I will work—I will, indeed, *Meliora*. I should not so much mind what I did, so that nobody knew me. Dear me, I once did Bob Diggs a good turn, and he swore if ever he could repay me he would. And he’s got a situation of some sort in the City, and could put me up to a thing or two. I’ve got his address somewhere, I know, and I’ll write to him at once. If you’ll only *start* me, *Meliora*, you shall see; and I’ll be for ever grateful.”

“And you will not request me to ‘hook it,’ any more?”

“I was only joking; I was a bit put out, I confess. There! there! I sit reprovèd; don’t bear malice, but help a poor fellow to the needful, and Heaven will reward you.”

“The best reward would be your own reformation, and your success as an honourable, industrious person. No, I do not bear malice; I forgive you for your foolish words, but I do *not* think you were joking—very far from it. Try to speak the truth, whatever you do. As to your scheme, I will think about it; if there is any hope for you, anywhere, the lack of a few pounds shall not spoil your chance.”

“Oh, *Meliora*, you are a good woman! a brick! a——”

“Hush! that will do. Now I must go to your father, who, I fear, has been waiting for me all this while. I was on my way to his room, when I met you, and turned back to see if your coffee was still keeping warm; for yesterday Nancy, being in a hurry to clear up, removed it before you

came down. You had better write your letter to Mr. Biggs, or Diggs, at once."

And at last Meliora found her way to Mr. Carisbroke's room, and showed him the formal receipt for the cheque she had carried with her on the previous night, and tried in vain to stay the flood-tide of his abounding gratitude, and at last compelled him to turn his thoughts towards the impending changes which must be made forthwith.

"I have been proposing that we should hold a family council here, this evening," she said; "here, in your room; because, Mr. Carisbroke, you see something must be settled, and that immediately. The New Year is close at hand. In the first place, we have to think of the clerical duties; we cannot close the church, you know, and it seems to me that at the present rate of payment, your substitutes will soon swallow up every penny of your private income."

"I had a letter from the Bishop last night. He proposes that I should resign the living into his hands. At first it made me feel very bitter; but now that I have thought it calmly over, I am not sure that I can do a better thing. It will be years, Ingledew says, before I stand up again in any pulpit. I know it will be *never*; my clerical life is ended. I was not worthy of my work, and God Himself has taken it from me. Here is the Bishop's letter—he writes kindly, but coldly; he is shocked, and no wonder, at the state of entanglement into which I have allowed my affairs to slide; and he says, *truly*, that a clergyman whose debts are so many and so large as to necessitate the steps which in this instance have to be taken, is a disgrace to the cloth. His advice is that I at once place my resignation in his hands. He will put in some young man in full orders, who will receive a moderate stipend, and occupy the Rectory. He thinks, both for myself and for my parishioners, this is the wisest course to take, and that it will cause less scandal than if I remained as nominal clergyman of the place. What do you think of it, Meliora?"

"It seems to me, at first sight, to cut the knot of many a difficulty; but I should like to think it well over before I give you my opinion. And you agree to this meeting?"

I quite think *all* your children ought to know what is before them. Frank has been painfully restive under the restrictions of an economical *ménage*, and thinks that I am usurping undue authority. The twins, too, are dissatisfied and full of complaints, almost to rebellion. They credit me with every privation, with every disagreeable change that has of necessity been made. A word from you would be useful in both cases."

So in the evening the council met, and Mr. Carisbroke did his best to set before his family the painful condition to which they were reduced. When he had ended, Frank said, "I can't think how you have managed to get into such an infernal scrape, sir!"

"Do not use that language, Frank," was the reply. "You cannot think? You must be extremely obtuse, or else wilfully blind, if you do not comprehend how large a share *you* have had in bringing me, and consequently your sisters, to this abject state of poverty! No! You are not alone to blame—very far from it. Perhaps I ought not to reproach you at all, for you only grew up in the way you were trained. You were always allowed to have your own will; you were nursed in luxuries to which you were not born; you were encouraged by the example of both your parents, and taught by daily habit to revel in lavish expenditure. I helped to nourish in you a vain and foolish spirit of self-indulgence and indolence; and I sent you to Oxford without any safeguard of true religious principle. Too late to retrace my steps, I confess my error. Should my daughters upbraid me with the ruin of their prospects, it is not more than I shall expect; but *you*, Frank, have had every opportunity, in spite of very many mistakes, of striking out for yourself a new and better course. Both of us must reap the harvest of our own folly and sin. As for myself, I have sown the wind, and I am reaping the whirlwind. And now I want to tell you all that the Bishop advises—nay, *urges*—me to resign the living of Perrywood!"

"You don't say so, sir?" cried Frank, starting up. "What a thundering shame! Because you have come to grief, he would sink you a little deeper in the mire! It's the way of the world, though. Success to the successful!"

God help the foremost ! The devil take the hindermost ! That's the proverbial philosophy of our day."

"We might complain, Frank, you and I, if we had fought a good fight and lost the day ! As it is, it ill becomes us to taunt the world with our own failures and shortcomings. The Bishop is only doing his duty, and I think he is right."

"But you will not be so mad as to yield to his suggestions, however forcibly he puts them?"

"I think I shall ! I have already written out a draft of a letter to his Lordship, acknowledging my great faults, thanking him for his just censure, and placing the living entirely, and at once, at his disposal. If my daughters and Meliora think I am right, the letter will be despatched to-morrow."

"Right !" groaned Frank. "Right to throw away twelve hundred a-year !"

"I am not throwing away twelve hundred a-year, Frank. For at least ten years the living will bring me in nothing, though I stick to it hard and fast. Had not illness come upon me, were it possible at any cost of suffering to do my duty, I would try my best, old as I am, to recover position, and at Perrywood. I would take all the services, I would do clerical work in the parish, I would take pupils, I would toil with all my powers of mind and body. But it may not be ! God has stricken me, and in mercy. I thank Him for all His dealings with me, and I desire humbly to acknowledge His great goodness, for though He has chastened me sore, He has not given me over to death. But, as the work of the sanctuary, of which I am unworthy, can never more be mine, I feel sure that it is both right and wise to bow to the will of my Diocesan."

"Well, sir, you must do as you like ; but it seems to me a pity. It looks as if you were ready to cry *peccavi* ; it is dreadfully like showing the white feather."

"And I do cry *peccavi* with all my heart. Contrition is not cowardice, Frank. Cannot you see, though, that I have really no other alternative ? If I remain nominal Rector of Perrywood, I must provide myself with an efficient curate—and a very superior one—not a mere fledg-

ling who may be willing to do the work for a title, or for an insignificant stipend. Such a man as would satisfy the parish would demand, and lawfully, too, a sum which I cannot possibly afford. When I had paid my substitute I should have nothing to live upon, nothing wherewith to support my family. I believe it is my duty at this crisis to yield to the Bishop and resign my living. Now, girls, what do you say ? ”

“ I suppose it is right,” sobbed Lavinia ; “ but it will be very hard to leave this house where we were born.”

“ And where poor mamma died,” said Maggie, with tears in her eyes.

“ Where poor mamma died ! ” echoed both the twins, more stolidly than usual.

“ And you, Joan ? ” questioned the Rector.

“ I say it is the right thing to do, papa. Meliora and I have talked it over, and we both think that under the circumstances there is nothing else to be done. We must all put our shoulders to the wheel, and work like Britons.”

“ I am sure I am ready to work,” said Lavinia, humbly ; “ but I don’t know what to do. If I were strong enough I would go out for a servant. I am not fit for any higher work.”

“ Nor I, either,” said Maggie. “ Governesses are supposed to know so much in these days. You and I were badly taught, Lavinia ; but that was not the worst of it—we never *tried* to learn.”

“ We never did. I remember saying young ladies need not worry themselves with study like girls who had to turn out and provide for themselves when schooldays were over. It was quite enough for *us* to speak good English, dance well, know a little French, play a little, and sing a little, in order to pass muster in society ; for *we* should never have to make market of our learning and accomplishments ! I said so when Meliora first came and urged us both to carry on our education.”

“ We were foolish girls, and we are only just coming to our senses. But we *will* do something, papa. We agreed last night, Lavinia and I, that we would throw away all false pride and make ourselves useful in some way—we don’t quite see yet in what way : only I think I

could learn to serve in a shop. Meliora says there are many young ladies, even clergymen's daughters, in the best London houses of business."

"And I think I might get a situation as junior teacher in a school," said Joan. "I am not at all backward in my studies, Meliora tells me, and I look so much older than I am, that my youth need scarcely be an objection. I could only expect a small salary at first, but it would be making a beginning."

"I have thought of something, also," interrupted Meliora. "Of course it is nothing more than an idea, for it only flashed upon me when your papa spoke of taking pupils. Now, in such a household of women, youths and young men would be somewhat out of place; but what is to prevent *our* keeping a boarding-school, or, for the matter of that, a boarding and day school combined? I think it might be managed. Two of us could conduct the house, and two of us undertake the pupils. There would then be no need for any one to turn out, and we should all keep together."

"It is an excellent idea," said Lavinia. "If Meliora will only have patience with me a little longer, I do think I could learn to keep house economically, and at the same time respectably. But I suppose we must leave Perrywood?"

"It would be well to begin our new life in a new neighbourhood, I *think*," rejoined the Rector; "but every step we take must be carefully weighed, and we must ask God to show us the path we ought to tread. Meliora's plan sounds good and practical, and if she will help us, something, I believe, may be made of it. Let us all think it over, my dears; we will not decide till New Year's Eve. This old home *must* be broken up; but under God's blessing we may, perhaps, make another, though *where* I do not know! When I am a little stronger I mean to apply myself to literary work. Frank must immediately obtain a situation."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FRESH START.

"I hold it truth, with him who sings
To one clear harp, in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."

"I've had a letter from Diggs, and he's a regular brick!" shouted Frank on the last morning of the year. "He has found me a berth; think of that, now!"

"A situation, do you mean?" asked Lavinia.

"Of course, mademoiselle! And I am going up to town as soon as ever I can. Now I call that jolly! I should have become a prey to confirmed *melancholia* if I had stopped much longer in this dead-alive, miserable hole, where you are expected to eat cold mutton, and never spend a bob on cigarettes. You are anything but a lively set, my sweet sisters!"

"I don't know what we have to make us lively," said Maggie, dolefully. "We don't mind *much* about the cold mutton, and we don't care at all for cigarettes, but we do want new winter clothes. Well, Frank, I do not think you will ever be of any use to *us*! You have no notion of the duties of a brother, so the sooner you take yourself off the better, and leave us to do the best we can for ourselves. Have you told papa?"

"I have not seen his Reverence to-day. But he will receive the news of my speedy departure with satisfaction, I have little doubt. He will bestow upon me a grave lecture, a heap of good advice, and his paternal blessing, I am afraid that will be my portion, as a prodigal son, and nothing more."

"But tell us about the situation," said Lavinia. "What is it? What will you have to do? And where will you live?"

"Diggs doesn't tell me much; he only says that there is a vacant desk in his office—or will be next week,

through the lucky dog that occupies it having turned out heir to a rich old woman, whom he never even saw. And Diggs is top of the tree, I find, in this City office, and he spoke a good word for me to his governors, and that's all about it. What shall I have to do? I don't know; quill-drive, I suppose, and add up columns of figures from morning till night. Beastly work it must be! but beggars ain't choosers. Of course, I sha'n't do any more than I can help. And, oh, ye gods and little fishes, to think that *I*—Frank Carisbroke—should come to sit upon a high stool in a merchant's office, with a pen stuck behind my ear! Where shall I live? In chambers, of course; all the fellows in London who haven't their own people to chum with, or who don't care for domestic felicity, live in chambers."

"Are they very different from lodgings?" asked Maggie.

"Oh, quite different," replied Frank, who had all sorts of airy, baseless notions of his own. "Cads live in lodgings, my dear girl; gentlemen inhabit 'chambers.' In lodgings there's a slavey and a harpy of a landlady, who prigs—what isn't sh'is'n! and the man next door plays the cornopean, and the woman upstairs plays Kalkbrenner's Variations on the pianoforte, and you have perennial mutton-chops, which are either half-raw or burnt to cinders! In chambers you have your own Lares and Penates—at least, I think so; and petticoated creatures are not admissible, save and except your laundress, who is a sort of female Methusaleh, who 'takes-you-in' and does for you in the most approved and orthodox fashion. But you dine at your club, you know, or at some *restaurant* where they know what's what, and do *not* offer you cold mutton, even with pickles; and there are luncheon-bars everywhere, where you can sustain nature towards the middle of the day; and, of course, you always know what to do with yourself of an evening. London is the place to live in, girls—the only place! You merely vegetate in the country, you don't live. I don't care if I don't see a green field for the next ten years! The parks for me! I want nothing one whit more rural!"

"But that sort of life must take a great deal of money? I know when we were in Clarges Street, with mamma, we

found we spent enormously, even when we were not at all extravagant. Everything was dearer than with us down here."

"Ah! womankind always are dreadfully expensive; they can't rough it, you know. It's quite another thing when you have only yourself to think for. For instance, I don't mind the knife board of an omnibus; you girls must have a cab whenever you stir, and as London cabbies are all rogues, you may think yourself very well off if you only pay twice your legal fare. Then, again, I can turn in anywhere and get a snack, if my bread-basket cries out; *you* must go in for a regular meal at home, and pay ten shillings for a skinny chicken that is all drumsticks! Ah! I quite understand it all; bachelor-life and family-life in London are as distinct as sparrows and nightingales!"

The girls listened gravely, but with many misgivings, and at length Lavinia inquired, "And what amount of salary will you receive, if one might be so bold as to ask?"

"Oh! that's the rub! I must be content to begin at the bottom, or well nigh the bottom of the ladder, Diggs says. Canapie Brothers must be a shabby lot, for they only offer me twenty-six shillings a week, and Diggs seems to think that is really quite satisfactory at first setting out. Of course, I am to have more after awhile."

"Twenty-six shillings a week!" pondered Lavinia; "how much a year is that?"

"Oh, I don't know! I should have to sit down and do a regular sum in order to find out, and of all the three great R's, I hate 'Rithmetic the most!"

"But you will have a great deal to do with figures, will you not, in your situation?" asked Maggie, doubtfully.

"Yes," he replied, biting his lips in his chagrin; "I shall have to do just what I most cordially detest; you ought to be very sorry for me, girls. It is all very well for you women to stop at home and play the piano, and crochet those hideous things you hang about your drawing-rooms, your utmost idea of useful labour being an hour or two of plain sewing; we men have to go out into

the world and rough it, whether we like it or not. I almost wish I were a woman."

"I am very glad you are *not*!" said Lavinia, with a gesture so much like contempt that Mr. Frank lost his composure, and muttering something about unsisterly conduct and want of feminine feeling, left the room in search of Meliora, to whom he wished to communicate his plans. He found her giving a music lesson to Joan, while little Ruby sprawled about on a fleecy rug close to the piano. The twins were laboriously translating a French fable.

"Meliora!" said the young gentleman, as he glanced round the room, "I want to speak to you *alone*! just send your pupils to the right-about, will you? I have something of consequence to tell you."

"Very well, I am at your service, as soon as Joan has finished her lesson. Netta and Brenda will not have completed their translation till twelve o'clock."

"But I can't wait; I am in a hurry, I tell you. Never mind Joan's strumming."

"Joan's strumming must be quite as important as your business, Frank; and, as you know, I never care to burden the coming hour with the duties of the present. You *must* wait."

With an exclamation of impatience, Frank threw himself into a chair, and gave himself up to meditation, while Joan did her best to understand a difficult passage in the *sonata* she was studying, and Netta confided to Brenda the fact that their French dictionary was just good for nothing, half the words they wanted being missing. They were looking for *vais*, and of course, poor children, failed to find it.

"Perhaps it is *vow*," said Brenda, suddenly. "*Je* is *I*. I know that, don't you? Let's write down, 'I vow.' If it's wrong, it isn't our fault. What's the good of a dictionary that never has the exact words you require! And *voux* is not in it, nor yet *faut*! Oh, dear, what a bother it is! And we've borrowed one of your novels, Frank, and we do so want to get away somewhere and finish it."

"You have borrowed one of my novels? Which of them, may I ask?"

"It is called 'Confessions of a Barmaid,' and it's delightful."

"It's delightful," murmured Netta. "But for goodness' sake, don't speak so loud, Brenda, or Meliora will hear us. Of course, *she* does not know, Frank; we cheat her all we can."

For one moment Frank felt appalled. Whatever liberties he might allow himself it shocked him to find his young sisters reading a book the pages of which teemed with pollution, nor was it pleasant to hear from those childish lips the confession of systematic deceit. Like many another reckless *roué*, Frank Carisbroke did not like to find his sisters following, however remotely, in his steps. Perhaps he never more severely blamed himself than at that moment; for though he could excuse himself for having in his possession a piece of literature which he knew to be at once vulgar and immoral, and, of course, utterly unfit to be in the hands of any young woman, he felt that he had acted infamously in leaving the book where it was possible for the twins to find it. They were insatiable in their desire for what they designated as "nice, amusing stories," and they were continually on the prowl in search of their favourite amusement.

"You had no business to take any book of mine without asking my leave," said Frank angrily, and so loudly that Meliora, in the middle of a semibreve-rest, heard, and turned toward the table. "You are not to finish it," he continued; "as soon as your lessons are over, carry it back to my room, and put it in the drawer again. It's a bad book, a very bad book, children!"

"Then you shouldn't have it," pouted Netta.

"I am sure it is interesting!" said Brenda, on the verge of melting into tears, "and I *must* know what became of Lisa, and whether she did make up her mind to run away from that horrid old aunt, and live with Lord Dashaway in a splendid mansion, and wear diamonds, and drink champagne every day! Oh, Frank, don't be nasty!"

"I can't let you read that story, I can't, indeed," he replied, sincerely reproaching himself for his carelessness; for "Lisa" and her companions were entirely of the *demi-*

monde. His only comfort was that the twins could not possibly understand one-half they read, and vice was, as yet, as much of a mystery to them as was virtue.

"I won't take it back," said Brenda, sullenly.

"No; nor I won't either," echoed Netta. "And you don't know where it is, and we won't tell you. He'll never find it, will he, Brenda?"

"No, never! We've got a nice hiding-place, that no one suspects. We are obliged to be very cunning, for Meliora is so sharp, and Vinnie and Maggie have got ever so disagreeable since papa fell ill, and they take sides against us, whenever we try to get our own way! Only think of their scolding, and getting Meliora to punish us, because we ate up a jar of preserved pineapple that we found, and drank one little bottle of champagne that——"

"That you *stole*, in fact," interrupted Frank, horribly disgusted, and feeling at the same time how evil had been his own influence over these unfortunate children, whose defective understandings, coupled with a certain depravity of taste, made them so difficult to deal with. It was he who, "for fun," had taught them to drink champagne; it was he who, in the same spirit, had helped them "to crib" forbidden dainties; and, worst of all, it was he who had encouraged them to set Meliora at defiance, and, when that was no longer possible, to deceive her at every turn. He was just about to administer a wholesome lecture, when Joan's last chords died away, and there was a sudden silence in the room. Joan took up little Ruby and carried her off, Meliora came to the table, where the twins had commenced anew to struggle with their fable.

"Now then, Meliora," cried Frank, springing to his feet, "let us go into the library."

"One moment! Netta, go and fetch that book which you have taken from your brother's room."

Netta plunged her head into her dictionary and pretended not to hear.

"Netta," continued Miss Martin, in the calm but emphatic tones which never failed sooner or later to awe her rebellious pupils; "go at once. You know I will be obeyed. It is useless to resist."

And Netta knew that when Meliora spoke in that way resistance was so much wasted force. She flung down her dictionary, and sullenly departed, while Brenda cried bitterly over her very literal translation. In a few minutes Netta returned, laid the book before her governess, and burst into a passion of angry tears. "You may go, children," was all Meliora's rejoinder; "your translation must be finished in the afternoon."

Left alone with Frank, she took up the well-thumbed novel, and turned to the young man.

"Frank, have you *no* conscience? How dare you, as a man, how could you as a gentleman, put such a book as this in the way of those poor children?"

"Meliora, I'm awfully sorry," he replied. "I never thought of their ferreting it out. I give you my word, I'm as sorry as you can be that Netta and Brenda ever opened it! It's not a woman's book."

"Then it is not a man's book. It may take more *ratsbane* to kill a strong man than a child; but poison is poison! Let me put this book into the fire!"

And without hesitation Meliora dropped it upon the glowing coals, where it was speedily consumed. "Now, Frank," she continued, "I must trouble you to give me the rest of your private library, or else keep the door of your bedroom locked, as soon as the bed is made."

"It won't be my bedroom next week, Meliora; I wanted to tell you. Diggs has been as good as his word, and found me a situation. I am to go up to town directly."

And then followed the account of what Diggs had written, and all the rest of it, only Mr. Frank had sufficient discretion to refrain from any reference to theatres and music-halls, and residence in chambers. He regretted, indeed, that he had spoken so candidly to his elder sisters, for somehow they had fallen under the spell of Meliora.

"The worst of it is," he said at length, "these merchant people are so confoundedly niggardly in their salaries. I shall soon get promoted, Diggs says; but at present I'm only to receive what cannot possibly keep body and soul together."

"What are you to have—weekly?"

"Twenty-six shillings. A beggar's pittance, or worse. I can't do with that, can I?"

"I think you will have to do with it. And twenty-six shillings a week are very good wages for the work done by an entirely unskilled hand. Also, it is ample for all your needs."

"Now you are joking. I can't get lodgings at one pound six a week, and I've got to eat and drink and do twenty things besides. A fellow *can't* live decently in London on less than five pounds a week."

"Oh, yes, 'a fellow' can; and this fellow *must*. Where is your house of business?"

"In King William Street, City."

"Very well. Then you must take humble lodgings at Brixton or Clapham; or, perhaps, Stockwell will be better. Now I come to think of it, Kennington will be best of all; you will have a fair walk morning and night, but not more than is good for your health. Besides, I know of two clean rooms in the neighbourhood that you can have for ten shillings a week."

"Mercy on us! What sort of rooms?"

"Small, but clean; and in a respectable, though lowly, by-street. The landlady is an elderly widow, who has known better days, and is undeniably honest and trustworthy, and a very good, motherly sort of person."

"I don't know that I like motherly persons, or widows who have seen better days. And I hate by-streets, and cupboards of rooms, where you can't swing a cat."

"Frank Carisbroke, you will have to cut your coat according to your cloth, or go coatless! That is to say, you must live on your wages or starve. You must be content to live like any other young man thrown upon his own resources in London, and hope for better days, which will surely come if you strive after them earnestly, persistently, and *lawfully*."

"But I know I never could make both ends meet! Hang it, Meliora, I could not manage with £300 a year! How then shall I keep out of debt with—let me see—how much a year?"

"Sixty-seven pounds, twelve shillings exactly. Not a magnificent income, I admit. Let us think; ten shillings

a week for your lodgings, two shillings for washing, an occasional 'bus fare, and incidentals; there remains just fourteen shillings for food and clothing."

"Fourteen shillings! I shall starve—absolutely *starve*! Talk of cruelty to animals!"

"You need not starve, but you must live frugally, of course. Many a better man than yourself has lived on a shilling a day and prospered."

"A shilling a day! You take away my breath, *Meliora*. And you know I got into debt over head and ears on I don't know how many shillings a day! Why, of course, I had as much a day as I shall now have a week."

"There is one comfort, you cannot easily get into debt in London."

"I beg your pardon. I have got jolly deep into debt in London. No place like London for emptying your pockets; no place like London for credit—under certain limitations."

"You will find an immense difficulty in getting into debt now, I can assure you. You pledged your father's credit, remember, not your own. Frank Carisbroke, under-graduate of Oxford, son of the Rector of Perrywood, and Frank Carisbroke, under-clerk in a house of business, on his own responsibility, and son of a paralysed bankrupt, are entirely different persons in the estimation of the world, as you will find."

"*Meliora*, you are horribly cruel! You are barbarous!"

"Am I? I do not mean to be so. But there are some people to whom it is kindness to speak plainly, and you are one of them. Listen, Frank; I wish to be your friend. I will *give* you—not lend you—five pounds to pay for your journey to town, and to meet your necessary expenses till you receive your first week's wages. If you are not quite crazy, you will start at the end of that first week with your undiminished wages in your purse, and a reserve of at least two pounds out of the five in case of a rainy day in shape of sickness, or any other inevitable misfortune. Do you remember that it is a year to-day since your poor mother died?"

"That I do!" he replied, bitterly. "If *she* had lived, she would never have let me be flung on the world with

an income of twenty-six shillings a week to be earned by miserable quill-driving."

"Rather thank God who has taken her from the evil to come. She could not have prevented any one of the troubles which have overtaken her family. The wolf was at the door for many a day before her death. Little Ruby came to share the fortunes of a fallen house."

"Fallen, indeed!"

"Ay, but that which is fallen may, under God's blessing, be raised to a height beyond its former estate. Go you, Frank Carisbroke, and do your duty. Conquer your selfishness, your vanity, and your indolence, and all may yet be well."

CHAPTER XIX.

WAYS AND MEANS.

To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new.

AND so it came to pass that Frank Carisbroke left Perrywood Rectory, which was not and could never be his home again. Mr. Carisbroke formally resigned the living; another month, and the family would have to vacate.

Frank went off in very sober mood; he had begun to realise what life in London might be on what appeared to him an income not worth mentioning, and he looked plaintively at the residue of his £5 note—*Meliora's* gift—when he had paid for his railway-ticket, and remembered how wantonly he had lavished many a similar little bit of paper that would have been a handsome fortune to him in this hour of his humiliation. His father had had no word of cheer for him; he could only say, when the moment of parting came, "Good-bye, my son; may God bless you and make you a better, and consequently a happier, man than I have ever been. Keep out of debt, learn the blessed lesson of self-denial, never seek present

relief at the price of future peace, and, above all, don't shirk the responsibilities which Providence may lay upon you. You have not been a good lad, Frank—but I will not upbraid you—I cannot! for I am more to blame than you are. I trained you up in the way you should *not* go, and I set you a miserable example.”

“And now, what is to become of *us*?” asked Lavinia, with streaming eyes, when she heard that the Bishop had received her father's resignation, and thought that “under the circumstances it was the most judicious, and, indeed, the only possible, step to take.”

“It's all very well for the Bishop to talk,” she continued mournfully, “when he has plenty of money and no end of friends. I wonder what he would say if the Archbishop of Canterbury read him a lesson on the misconduct of his own affairs, and politely requested him to give up his position, his honours, and everything in life, to become a private individual with next to nothing a year.”

“It is easy to censure,” said Maggie, bitterly; “so simple a thing to give advice concerning difficulties which do not concern oneself. And I do think papa ought to have considered *us* before he took a step which I don't call ‘judicious,’ and never shall, whatever the Bishop and Meliora may say!”

“It's all very fine, and I dare say it is right. I wish we had been brought up in Meliora's school—to some extent, that is. But all the moralising in the world will not help us now. By the end of this month we shall be far away from Perrywood, and we do not even know which way we shall turn our steps. It is horrible to think of.”

“Most horrible! I should think no family was ever in such circumstances before. However, we must try to make the best of the worst, as Joan says.”

“If one only knew how to make the best of such a miserable fate.”

That evening the elder girls and Meliora were in Mr. Carisbroke's room, the twins were playing draughts downstairs, Joan was putting Ruby to bed, but presently she came in with her work-basket on her arm. The *ci-devant* Rector, who was gradually getting stronger, so far as his

general health was concerned, had been reading old letters, looking through a heap of memoranda, and turning over a bundle of ancient documents, which Meliora fetched him from the bureau in the library. He was still, however, utterly unable to walk, nor could he maintain, without uneasiness, an erect sitting posture for many minutes together. He usually reclined on a broad, old-fashioned sofa, with a table covered with books and papers at his side. That morning he had had a long and confidential talk with Dr. Ingledew; in the afternoon he had a private interview with Mr. Harries, one of his oldest and most trusted friends, and an eminent solicitor at Cotswoldbury. It was quite time that matters should be fully and clearly understood by all.

Mr. Carisbroke turned over his papers afresh, and presently he commenced:—"I have been talking to Mr. Harries, my children, and I think I comprehend the situation in which we are placed. You were quite right, Meliora. The private resources must go with the rest; nothing can be saved from the creditors. The principal of poor mamma's fortune having been not once only, but many times encroached upon, it is quite clear that the so-called settlements are really good-for-nothing. Mr. Harries, thinks we cannot, with any appearance of honesty, to say nothing of honour, strive to retain the remainder for ourselves."

"Papa!" cried Lavinia, aghast. "You do not mean that we are tamely to relinquish all we have to those greedy creditors?"

"I am afraid there is no question of our being consulted, my dear. If we strove to keep back those few last thousands, we should only be worsted in the fight. Mr. Harries has had an opinion from a high legal authority, and it is to the effect that the precedent so flagrantly furnished by our own act and deed cuts away all ground of defence from under our feet. Your grandfather's will has been closely inspected, and declared faulty. He certainly intended that the fortune of his daughter Louisa should be settled inalienably on herself, and on her children, and that her husband should have no control over the estate. But then poor mamma herself was the first

to drive a coach and horses through her supposed settlement; and the barriers once broken down could never be restored. At least, we never tried to mend the gap, though there was some talk, years ago, of retrenching, in order to replace the sum then appropriated, and Mr. Harries strongly advised the execution of a certain legal deed, which should make all safe and fast again. I was then in a position to secure all that was left to my wife, as her father had originally intended."

"And you did not act upon Mr. Harries' advice?" asked Maggie.

"No, my dear, I did not; and now I most heartily wish I had. But very soon—it was just before Joan was born, I recollect—we found that we had again exceeded our income; we had been making a Continental tour, and spending money with both hands; and in order to meet fresh expenses comfortably, it was necessary to make another dip into the private funds. A little while longer, and Frank began to clamour for more money than could be conveniently spared from the regular income, and this time poor mamma would hear of no hesitation. Frank was always her darling, you know; from a child he had had his own way; she could not bear that any request of his, any desire, however unreasonable, should not be granted, and she took the matter, as it was in her power to do, into her own hands. Once more Mr. Harries, expostulated, and received anything but thanks for his interference. There was another selling-out; and, ere long, another; and yet another! Of course the creditors have made themselves acquainted with all these particulars, and consequently they include the residue of private means as '*assets*.'"

"The mean creatures!" cried Maggie, "taking our last shilling, as it were! How hatefully sordid tradespeople are!"

"Maggie," said her father, sorrowfully, "you are talking very foolishly; but I cannot blame you, for you have been taught nonsensical notions from your infancy. What is there sordid in any person—be he gentleman or shopkeeper—claiming his own just dues? I have looked over most of the bills, and though some of the charges are,

I must say, excessive, I find no single entry which it is possible to dispute. Once I said to Mr. Mander, the grocer, that I thought his prices were exceptionally high, and he replied that I and other customers who took such long credit must please to remember that by being kept so long out of his money he was virtually denied the use of it, and, consequently, lost interest, while he, on his part, was obliged to pay cash down, or, at the outside, could take but very short credit, for all the goods supplied to such customers as month after month ignored their '*accounts rendered*.' He said, too, he would be happy to sell at lower rates, if people would but pay for their purchases on delivery, or at short, stated, regular intervals; but, as he was so long kept out of his money by the majority of customers, he was compelled to sell at higher prices, in order to somehow reimburse himself, as far as he was able. And I could see that to some extent he had reason and justice on his side. What do you say, Meliora?"

"I agree with you that he spoke, on the whole, reasonably and justly; but I believe many tradesmen, chiefly those who allow credit, are in the habit of charging more or less extortionately all round in order to make up for the bad debts they are sure to contract. Thus those who pay are actually fined for those who do not, or for those who require an almost unlimited credit. I wish a universal system of cash-payments could be at once inaugurated; it would be good for both buyer and seller, and save an infinity of anxiety and distress."

"If I had my time over again," sighed Mr. Carisbroke, "I would never let any account run. I would wipe out every debt of every sort, at least quarterly, if not oftener. But it is too late now; my debts have brought me to ruin and disgrace, and even if they were paid in full to-night I should have no income wherewith to begin anew. Lavinia and Maggie, I have been talking to Meliora about situations for you both; you know you *must* do something."

"I am ready to do anything—*anything*!" wept Lavinia. "It is dreadful, most dreadful; but now that everybody knows we are beggars—miserable paupers!—I scarcely mind what I do. I am afraid, Meliora, you cannot re-

commend me as a governess? I have tried to correct the twins' exercises, and found that I was almost in as great a fog as they. As for Joan, she knows heaps more than I do; she has had the benefit of good teaching; I have not, neither has Maggie. I could not pretend to teach, for I know I should be found out, like the unhappy schoolmistress, who put upon her circulars that she taught 'Grammar,' and was fain to confess that she did not know it herself. I am sure I don't know it, though I could once repeat *Lindley Murray* from beginning to end, and a great part of *Lennie* besides. Then there is the *Use of the Globes*—people who go in for governessing are expected to teach *them*, and I might as well attempt to teach my pupils how to calculate an eclipse or to measure the distance between our earth and the polestar."

"Well, then, it's settled we can't be governesses! What *shall* we be, Meliora—we two grown-up young women, who have learned nothing properly, and know nothing in particular, and are by no means amiable, and don't like work, and can't dig, and to beg are ashamed?"

"I think Maggie could learn dressmaking, and in a very short time, if she were determined to do it."

There was a shriek of horror from one girl, and a piteous wail from the other.

"Why!" cried Lavinia, "dressmakers are not ladies!"

"I beg your pardon," replied Meliora. "I have known several dressmakers who were veritable gentlewomen, and I doubt not there are many more whom I do not know. There are plenty of dressmakers who are *not* ladies, I grant; but the same thing may also be said of numerous young women who can afford to sit with their hands before them, and who are even rich enough to have equipage and servants at their disposal. But, Lavinia, I am rather disappointed to hear you talk in this strain. How many days have passed since you declared yourself willing to do *anything*?—go out to service, stand behind a counter—in short, whatever it pleased God to bestow upon you in the shape of honest remunerative labour. And now you are scandalised at the idea of Maggie turning her evident talent for dressmaking to good account."

"I beg your pardon, Meliora; it was Maggie, not I, who proposed serving in a shop, or taking some light service. And Joan thought she could be junior teacher in a boarding-school—teach the little ones, wash, dress, and comb them, mend their clothes, and all that sort of thing, which is expected from miserable junior teachers. I know what drudges they are! There was one at a school mamma went to, and she even washed up the breakfast things, and attended to the house linen!"

"Now, Lavinia," said Maggie, impatiently, "you know quite well we agreed together that we would put away all silly pride, and take up whatever work came to us, so that we might earn an honest living and be a burden to nobody. However, I do not think we need turn maids-of-all-work just yet. Have you forgotten what Meliora proposed—that we should keep a school somewhere?"

"I have not forgotten it; but I never supposed she was in sober earnest, especially as she said the 'idea' had only just 'flashed' upon her, and she has not spoken of it since to either of us. Perhaps she has mentioned it to Joan?"

"Yes," returned Miss Martin. "Joan and I have talked it over very seriously. I said nothing openly, because I object to discussing plans until I am pretty sure they stand upon a sure foundation. I did not even resume the subject with Mr. Carisbroke, for I felt some doubt as to the wisdom of what had occurred to me so very suddenly. Such an instantaneous idea may be a 'happy thought'—an absolute inspiration—or, it may be a terrible mistake! I am now of opinion that the notion was a good and sound one, and that we may all, if we strive to co-operate, succeed in the work we think of undertaking. But nothing will be done if we, any of us, start by determining not to compromise our own dignity. You offered to undertake the housekeeping, Lavinia, and I think you may manage it tolerably, if you will throw your whole heart into it; but you will find much to *do*, for at first setting out we shall have to be content with one servant, and that an inexperienced one. You will need all your skill, and more than all your patience."

"I *could* housekeep, if I gave myself to it, I am sure,

and it would be better in every way to work with my own family, and in my own home, than to go out into the world, even if I could earn money. I am afraid I should make but a poor hand in a shop, for I should be sure to lose my temper when the customers were unreasonable—and I know *how* unreasonable and tiresome I have been myself; and as for teaching, that is quite out of the question. But I could manage the kitchen department, I think, and I am really beginning to like cookery.”

“And you will like it more and more if you will study it with perseverance and goodwill. Maggie would never become a respectable cook if she tried her utmost, for she has a tendency to turn faint over the fire; but she can sew, and has undoubtedly a talent for all kinds of needlework. Till our school begins to answer, we shall have to make all our own dresses, and do our own millinery in the best way we can. But this subdivision of labour can be gone into at another time. We need not now weary your father with minor discussion; let us speak rather of those matters on which he must himself principally decide. First, let me ask, do you *all* agree to my proposal, that we unite our forces and our endeavours in every way, by keeping a school for girls of all ages—either a boarding or a day school, or both combined, as shall seem most expedient to us?”

“Oh yes! *yes!*” exclaimed both the elder girls. “We do agree, with all our hearts.” Joan did not speak; Meliora knew well enough how fully her assent was given.

“Do *you* consent, Mr. Carisbroke?”

“Most thankfully. Your plan appears to be the only one which will save my poor girls from being thrown upon a world on which they are so little qualified to enter. Lavinia and Margaret would find it difficult to obtain any kind of remunerative employment, I am afraid. Joan is at present too young to enter the lists away from home; the twins it is needless to discuss.”

“Nevertheless,” interrupted Meliora, “I have some hopes of the twins when they have been made to understand that a new life lies before them which they have no alternative but to embrace. They will never fully comprehend their changed position, poor children, till they have

actually said 'Good-bye' to Perrywood. I see many ways in which they may be utilised to their own advantage. They may be taught some branches of cookery, I believe, and they really rather enjoy a little household work. Brenda is fond of rubbing up furniture, and Netta quite enjoys cleaning the plate, when she is allowed to attempt it. They are both able-bodied, and they like active employment, if any."

"Ah! that is well said—'if any!' They are naturally, I may say, *comatose*, and they are never so well content as when they can loll about, and doze, and eat their favourite sweetmeats. Like little cats, they only ask for food, plenty of warmth, plenty of repose, and not to be disturbed."

"They have improved of late, but I am convinced it is only waste of time and energy to endeavour to educate them up to the lowest standard of young ladies in general. I have not insisted on many lessons for several months past. I only give them enough to keep them from idleness, and consequent mischief. They read to me every day, do a little French—after a fashion—learn some hymns and pieces of poetry, which they undertake very willingly, and I make a point of an hour's plain sewing and half-an-hour's arithmetic. But all this is irrelevant till we know where we are going."

"I should like to leave this neighbourhood," said the ex-Rector sadly. "I must leave Perrywood, and it would be very painful to me, to all, I believe, to inhabit another house here, and to meet continually people whom we—whom *I* have wronged, and who cannot be expected to judge us too kindly."

"I have thought it over," said Meliora, "and I have already taken steps, subject, of course, to your approval. My sister knows of a well-established middle-class school, which may be secured for a small premium. It is not far from Hampstead Heath. I have written for full particulars."

"But where is the premium to come from?"

"It can be arranged, I think. I must have a little conversation with your friend, Mr. Harries. I quite believe something will be left to you and yours from the wreck—not much, perhaps, but still something, which may serve

for fresh beginnings. It is only just that it should be so. You fully trust me, then, and leave me to make all necessary arrangements, Mr. Carisbroke—of course, with the assistance of your daughters.”

“I fully trust you, Meliora. I would trust you with life, with honour, with everything that I have.”

CHAPTER XX.

LAST DAYS AT PERRYWOOD.

“Teach me to feel another’s woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I to others show,
That mercy show to me.”

THE Carisbrokes remained longer at Carisbroke Rectory than they had counted upon. When the plans of the family were generally understood, and it became known that they gave up their entire possessions without reserve, a wonderful reaction set in, and the ex-Rector was once more popular in the neighbourhood.

Nearly all the parishioners expressed their sympathy, and their deep regret at parting; only the obdurate Green, and two or three smaller tradesmen—his satellites—continued to give vent to malignant observations, and to evince all possible contempt whenever reference was made to “that reverend rascal.” The butcher, in consequence, finding himself decidedly in the minority, waxed furious, and would fain have had his unfortunate debtor denounced from the market-place—that is to say, from the much-trodden village-green, where on Saturdays a little fruit and a few vegetables, together with other oddments in the shape of greasy-cakes, cheap tops, and all sorts of “sticky-stuff,” were exposed for sale.

“I say he is a disgrace to his cloth; and I shall always say it; and I don’t see why he shouldn’t have his deserts,

like other fraudulent bankrupts. He's made his bed, and his children's beds; let them lie on it!"

"And they will lie on it! Mr. Carisbroke has not done the right thing for many a year, and his good lady, whom we won't defame, because the Lord has taken her to Himself, was never the woman to win him round to wiser and better ways. Some of us are blessed in partners; some are *not*! Thank God! I've got as good a little woman as ever wore shoe-leather; I don't say she is perfect; but she knows her duty, and she does it; and she'd work her fingers to the bone before she would see her children suffer any want, or got me into any sort of trouble. I think Mr. Carisbroke is punished enough, and he has done the right thing at last—given up all he has, and is living on as little as will keep body and soul together."

"It isn't true, I suppose—it can't be true—what I heard at the 'Rose and Shamrock' last night?"

"And what might you have heard at the 'Rose and Shamrock'? I don't often go there now; my wife likes me to smoke my pipe by my own fireside."

"That a lot of fools—and *you* foremost among 'em—was a-going to make a *presentation* to Mr. Carisbroke before he left! I didn't believe it, for such a thing is past all understandin'."

"It is true, nevertheless. We *are* going to present our late Rector with a testimonial of our friendship and kind remembrance, and all that sort of thing; we had better not say much about esteem, I suppose, for, after what has passed, it would seem too much like a mockery. We didn't ask you to be on the committee, for we knew you would refuse."

"I am glad you knew it! No! I never would lend myself to such folly. Seems to me, all the heroes of this here day are made out of criminals and rash simpletons. Mr. Baxter, I thought you were a man of sense. Why! the whole family has been paupers, and nothing better, for years past; they've fattened and batted on the goods we've supplied, and they've never paid for 'em."

"I don't defend the Carisbrokes, but you need not talk as if nothing was coming to you; there'll be very good dividends, as you must know, if you take the trouble to

think about it. You won't lose more than you've lost through gentlefolks, many a time before, nor perhaps so much. And Miss Martin does say that in process of time the last farthing will be paid."

"In process of time! This day ninety-nine years, perhaps! Miss Martin! I hate that woman."

"And I very much admire her, though she did make us all look very foolish that night over the accounts. But, hate her or love her, she means what she says, and what she says will come to pass. Everybody will be paid in full—some day—mark my words."

"Ah, '*Some day!*' That's a sort of bank I decline to draw upon. S'pose I promised to pay for beasts '*some day*'? should I get 'em home, I'd like to know? And who's to pay, I ask? The Rector will never have his say in a pulpit any more, and I never did hear of a parson—not even a workus chaplain—as couldn't stand on his legs. All his private property is gone; he can't go into any sort of business; he is an invalid for life, nobody is likely to leave him a fortin, and he's been and gone and lost his character with the Bishop. It's no more money you'll ever get out of *his* pockets, and you'll see!"

"The young ladies mean to work; they are going to make a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull all together, and when once people put their shoulders to the wheel and stick to it they are pretty sure to get the cart out of the rut, be it never so deep."

"Oh well! We shall see. For myself, I make a point of not expecting anything; so, verily, I sha'n't be disappointed."

"All right, each one to his own way of thinking; we must agree to differ."

Yes, it was quite true; a strong sentiment of compassion and of compunction for all harsh judgments had seized upon the inhabitants of Perrywood and its vicinity, and a subscription was set on foot with the avowed object of presenting a sum of money, the largest that could be got together within a given period, "To the Rev. Francis Carisbroke, M.A., late Rector of Perrywood, who for twenty-eight years had ministered in the parish church, and to the parishioners thereof." And as soon as the

exact day of the Carisbroke exodus should be fixed, it was intended that the presentation should take place, and the purse, together with an illuminated address expressive of sympathy and kindly regards, be placed at the disposal of Mr. Carisbroke.

The living was now in the hands of the Bishop, but no one was regularly appointed, and the ex-Rector was informed that the Rectory would be at his service up to the end of February, after which time it must be got ready for the new incomers. This extension of residence was most welcome to all, for as yet Mr. Carisbroke was hardly fit to travel, and January proved to be a most inclement month. The girls were glad to linger on in their old home, which day by day grew dearer to them; Meliora, finding business increase and difficulties thickening upon her hands, was only too thankful to avail herself of the delay. Only Joan seemed eager to set out on the new course lying before her. At first it was impossible to make the twins comprehend the painful fact of their compulsory removal; they were sure Meliora was only trying to frighten them, for they were not so silly as to believe that a real live Rector could be turned out of his Rectory against his will, even though he had lost all his money, and was too unwell to take the services! And Brenda actually began to reason on the impolicy of the approaching change, "for," quoth she, with a sagacity that was startling in one so dull of reason, "we pay no rent now; this house is our own as long as papa lives; if we go to London we must pay rent like other people, and if we are so poor where is the good of going to fresh expenses?"

"What's the good of going to fresh expenses?" chimed in Netta. "And Mrs. Edwardes told me that 'removing' costs lots of money! Why should we spend lots of money when we haven't got any? Mrs. Edwardes says three removings are quite as bad as a fire!"

"Quite as bad as a fire," murmured Brenda. "I am sure it is the wisest plan to stop here, where we always have been. And I know London is an awful place. Nurse Barnard always said it was."

"London is an awful place!" said Netta. "There is

no milk, nor bread, and they always have the cattle-disease."

"Who have?" asked Joan, half-laughing; "the cattle, or the Londoners themselves?"

"Why, the cattle, to be sure," replied Netta, gravely. "What very silly questions you do ask, Joan! One would think you hadn't all your senses! People don't have—what do you call it?—*rinderpest*, do they? It's the cattle, I mean, that go wild about London streets—dreadful creatures, that toss their big horns, and run at you! not a bit like our dear country cows, that give us milk."

"But the London cows give milk, I suppose, such as it is?"

"Oh, no; they are quite another sort—very fierce and large; and they are made into beef when they are killed," insisted Brenda. "Nurse Barnard says London is a dreadful place, that has been the ruin of many a young person! And I won't go—I won't!" and the poor child, that was almost a woman in years, burst into tears and wept bitterly.

"And I won't go," cried Netta, between her sobs; "Brenda and I will stay here, and not get ruined in London by wicked people and mad bulls."

Meliora tried to comfort them by telling them they were not exactly going to London, but to a nice place near it, where there were plenty of green fields, and a beautiful wide heath, and good milk from cows as pretty and gentle as their own departed pets. But they could go into London now and then under safe escort, and see the sights—the Tower, where they could view the Crown jewels, and the block and axe on which people were once beheaded; the Zoological Gardens, where the real wild beasts were kept; and Madame Tussaud's exhibition in Baker Street, where there were rooms full of life-like wax-works!

It would be nice to see the wax-works, the twins admitted—very nice! but they had rather not be taken to the Zoo, lest the lions and tigers should get loose and devour them. And they were not quite sure about the Tower. Suppose the keepers shut the gates—and there

was one gate called the "Bloody Gate," they were quite sure—and refused to let them go. But on the whole they were soothed by the prospect of Hampstead Heath, and occasional donkey-rides, with now and then a trip to London "to see the sights."

"And you are sure we sha'n't be ruined?" asked Brenda, anxiously, when she had recovered her spirits, and was beginning to count the days that must elapse before that of final departure.

"What do you mean by being ruined?" asked Meliora, with some curiosity.

"Why, being murdered, to be sure!" replied Brenda; "or carried away into slavery. I know such things are done, or Nurse Barnard would not have talked about them. She had a niece who was very fond of dress, and she went to London because she wanted to be a lady, and *she* was ruined. And she knows a young man who went, ever so long ago, and he fell into bad company, and *he* was ruined! Ask nurse yourself if I am telling stories."

"Well," said Meliora, "we will try to keep out of bad company; it is quite a mistake to suppose one gets into it without choice; and you need not be fond of dress in London, any more than at Perrywood. The love of finery has been the ruin of many a girl, I must allow, and many a woman; and, more still, of many a woman's husband and family; so we will dress plainly, my dear Brenda, and be intimate with good people only; thus we shall escape the danger."

After that the twins talked incessantly of the wonderful things they were to see in London, and of their summer rambles upon the Heath, and they began immediately to pack their own effects. It was quite a relief to the rest of the family to be spared the tearful lamentations which had been the order of the day, and which were, to a great extent, to be imputed to the foolish conversation of Nurse Barnard, who, naturally garrulous, found much pleasure in exciting the fears and the wonder of the poor half-witted twins.

And once it happened that Meliora had to go up to town in order to complete certain arrangements, and the whole household felt as if its mainstay were withdrawn.

Curiously enough, the elder girls appealed more than once to Joan, explaining that she knew "Meliora's ways" better than any one else, and could tell them how she ordered this or that, and how she met an emergency. As for Joan, she devoted herself to her baby-sister, and Ruby was now becoming a fine child, crowing and chuckling continually, and beginning to stammer out a few words. What was Joan's delight, when her charge began to lisp what was intended to be her own name, to stretch out her fat little arms to her young godmother and cry, "Onie!—Onie!"—her version of "Joanie," as it was supposed to be.

One morning Joan carried her into Mr. Carisbroke's room, and, for the first time, the child did not cry at the sight of him, but opened her large dark eyes and stared seriously at his pale, wasted features; then suddenly breaking into shrill laughter, she made a dart at his fast-whitening hair, but missing the especial lock she wished to appropriate, seized his spectacles instead, and to the astonishment of both Joan and her father, said distinctly, "Pa—pa! poo papa!"

The roguish smile of triumph on the glowing baby-face, and the piping baby-voice greatly touched the invalid. Joan hardly knew whether it was pain or pleasure to him, to hear the little one's sudden appeal; but a minute afterwards he said, "I wonder if she would come to me, Joan? I could hold her quite safely, if you put her into my arms."

It was rather a hazardous experiment, and Joan scarcely liked entrusting her treasure to a guardianship so frail, albeit tender and parental; but she thought her father might be hurt if she seemed to hesitate; so, with beating heart, she laid little Miss Ruby in the arms that were open to receive her. Instead of the scream of mingled fright and disapprobation that Joan had feared, the child nestled on her father's breast, and lay there cooing, and making funny little noises, such as mothers and nurses love to hear, apparently quite contented.

"Well, papa!" said Joan, much relieved, "as you are willing to undertake the post of nursemaid, and as Ruby seems to appreciate her position, I think I will finish my letter to Meliora."

"Yes, my dear, but finish it here, please. Ruby may resent your departure."

"All right, papa; my blotting-case is in this davenport, I need not leave the room."

A few minutes, perhaps a quarter of an hour, elapsed, and the silence was broken only by the crackling of the fire, and the quick movement of Joan's pen across the paper. When she had finished her letter, ready for the post, she looked round marvelling at the baby's quietness. Little Ruby had fallen asleep in her father's embrace, and there were tears in his eyes, as he held her close to him.

"Let me take her now, papa dear," said Joan, approaching; "you are not used to her weight; she will tire you."

"No, no! it might disturb her. My poor little Ruby, it is not much her careless, selfish father can do for her. How she grows!"

"And isn't she a beauty? She has lovely eyes, and such long black lashes. My pretty blossom, my jewel! She will be the gem of us all, papa! You will have one handsome daughter when *she* grows up."

"I shall never see her grown-up, my dear Joan. My poor little Ruby will be an orphan long before she ceases to be a child. You will have to be father as well as mother to her, my dear."

"If it be so," replied Joan, solemnly, "I will be to her all that I can be. God helping me, she shall never miss a father's care, nor a mother's love. I will devote myself to her, and let nothing ever come between her and the affection I bear her. And I will try to do as the Bible says—'bring her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.' I promise you, papa——"

"Hush, my dear; make no promises. I am sure you will be a wise mother as well as a loving sister to this little one, whose coming seems to have heralded all our misfortunes."

"Don't say that, papa, please! To me she is the pledge of better days than we have known. Our troubles were coming—must have come, if I had remained your big baby to the last. Oh, yes, she will always be my darling and my jewel, my greatest, dearest treasure."

"Joan, how old are you?"

"I shall be fifteen in June, papa."

"You seem much older. You have grown-up wonderfully during the last year."

"I think I have. I feel in myself like a grave woman; without being conscious of it, I have somehow put away all childish things. I think it was taking Ruby for my own child that did it—that—and—and the troubles, you know!"

"Yes, my poor girl, troubles sober one more speedily than many years, and you have had your full share. But I hope, Joan, a happy life is still before you, in spite of present sorrow. You have borne the yoke in your youth; I have not—it is heavier and harder to bear, by many degrees, when it presses upon middle-aged shoulders. When I think of the wasted, misspent past, my heart sinks within me. God gave me so many good things; He filled my cup to overflowing; He put within my reach all happiness and honour, and I, like the prodigal, lavished my substance, if not exactly in riotous living, yet in self-indulgence, indolent apathy, and many needless luxuries. The æstheticism of which I have been so foolishly proud was really nothing more than a refined sensuousness. A so-called devotion to art is too often a weak indulgence in self-gratification. And now my day is over, my work is left undone. I am an old man, disgraced and dishonoured, and my children must despise me."

"Indeed, and indeed we do not, papa! Never think such a thing. The past was wrong, no doubt; we did not seem to see rightly, or to recognise our duties, till God sent *Meliora* to us; but we are trying, all of us, to mend. Take comfort, papa, all will yet be well."

"Not for me, Joan, my dear; not for me. My life here is ended. I may linger on a few months—it may even be a few years, Dr. Ingledew tells me; but it will be as a cumberer of the ground, a burden upon those for whom it was my bounden duty to provide. When I look around, and see the straits to which I have reduced my children, and feel my utter helplessness, I wish—almost—that I had not rallied from that all but fatal illness."

"Hush, papa! That is naughty. God has given you renewed life, you may be sure, for good purposes, for your

happiness, I truly believe, and certainly for ours—for my own, most decidedly. And I never loved you half so much as I do now."

"You are a dear child to me. If I could only *do* something, Joan, if I could only work in some humble way, and so help to fill the family treasury! But what can a man do without his legs, and with only half a backbone!"

"Wait till we get settled at Hampstead Heath, papa. *Meliora* thinks when you are quite better you might find literary work—and I think so too; indeed, it was my thought, and I mentioned it to her first. Your scholarship is undeniable; why not turn it to some account?"

"I will think of it. I might very soon, I believe, do a little in that way; it would pass away the weary hours, and it would be such a joy to feel that I was adding something to the general stock. And, Joan, I don't know how much will be owing to my creditors when my affairs are settled—nothing legally, I am aware—but morally I shall be their debtor till the last penny I owe them is discharged. If only I could leave this world clear of even the smallest debt."

"I think you will, papa; for we shall all strive and help. And this I do promise—if it should please God to take you before all is duly paid—I will never rest till every obligation is fully discharged. No man shall ever have cause to say after your death that Francis Carisbroke owes him money. That is, if I live, and have health and strength to labour."

CHAPTER XXI.

GOING-OUT AND COMING-IN.

God bless our going-out, nor less
 Our coming-in, and make them sure ;
 God bless our daily bread, and bless
 Whate'er we do, whate'er endure ;
 In death unto His peace awake us,
 And heirs of His salvation make us.

IT came at last, that dreadful and dreaded day of parting, and the Carisbokes left Perrywood Rectory. But before the final leave-taking was the presentation of the "Testimonial," which had caused Mr. Green and some others so many and such fierce heart-burnings. The whole affair had been kept as secret as possible, and not one of the family—if we except Meliora—had the smallest suspicion of what was in progress. Mr. Carisbroke was entirely taken by surprise, when, one evening, he was politely asked to grant an audience to Mr. Baxter and Mr. Bland, on behalf of a large number of the parishioners.

"What can they want to see me about?" said the invalid, nervously. "Meliora, will it not do quite as well if you go and hear what they have to say?"

"By no means," she answered quite gaily. "Our friends downstairs would never forgive me if I cheated them out of the pleasure of a personal interview, on which I am sure they have been counting."

"You know, then, what their business is?"

"I can form a shrewd guess. You need not disquiet yourself, Mr. Carisbroke; these kind friends will not say a word to distress you. And you will hurt them very much, and through them, many others, if you refuse to receive them."

"You think, then, I must see them?"

"I do, indeed! You would, believe me, deprive yourself of much pleasure and comfort if you sent them away."

"Very well! Tell them to come up. But, oh, Meliora,

I have never spoken to Mr. Baxter since—since that Sunday,—you know.”

“That is your fault, not his. He has been in the house several times, and has been of great service to us in several small pieces of business which we women-folk had to transact.”

“Tell him—tell both gentlemen—to come up.”

Meliora soon ushered them into the room, and was leaving them alone with the ex-Rector, when Mr. Baxter said, “Pray don’t leave us, Miss Martin; what we have to say, we wish to say to you, and to all the young ladies, if they will be good enough to spare us a few minutes. We are glad to see you, Mr. Carisbroke—glad and sorry; glad to find you so much better than we dared to expect; sorry that our mission is to say ‘good-bye.’ But”—seeing his auditor’s face twitching nervously—“we won’t talk about that; good-byes are always painful, and the less *said* the better. Only you needn’t think, sir, that we shan’t miss you, or that it won’t trouble us to see another clergyman in your place. You’ve christened, and married, and buried us and ours these many years, and you’ve preached us many fine and learned sermons, such as we shan’t hear again in a hurry. Eh, Mr. Bland?”

For Mr. Bland stood silent and helpless, alternately cherishing one whisker and then another, and Mr. Baxter thought it was quite time he came to the rescue.

“We are hardly likely to have another Rector so eloquent, so famed for his erudition, so—very—so——” stammered Mr. Bland, breaking down in the speech he had studiously prepared. He said afterwards that every word went clean out of his head, though he knew it all by heart, when he saw his once handsome and stately Rector lying before him, a worn-out, broken-down invalid, so much aged and altered that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes.

The return of Meliora, accompanied by Lavinia, Maggie, and Joan, happily created a diversion.

And then Mr. Baxter again took up his parable, and waxed eloquent, and Mr. Bland caught his spirit, and had something to say for himself, and between them the story was told, and a handsome morocco purse containing £200

in new crisp Bank of England notes was handed over to Mr. Carisbroke.

"I hardly know whether I ought to take it; I do not deserve it," said the poor ex-Rector, with a tremor in his voice that made Joan anxious. He was so apt now to break down in rather childish fashion.

"Oh, as for that, you do deserve it, I am sure, Mr. Carisbroke; though, for the matter of that, we none of us *deserve* what we get," blundered Mr. Bland, trying to be at once reassuring and highly moral.

"Don't say a word!" exclaimed Mr. Baxter; "it's just a little parting gift, a small testimony of regard from a few real friends, who would be more hurt than I can express if you did not take it. If you knew half the pleasure it has been to some folks to get it together, and to Mr. Bland and me to come here to-night and present it, you would not say such a word! There, Mr. Carisbroke, take it with 'all our loves,' as the ladies say, and use it, and when you look at the purse think kindly of old friends at Perrywood. Some of us may have cut up a little rough, Mr. Carisbroke; but with most of us our bark is far worse than our bite, and we have nothing to say now but what's respectful and affectionate and full of sympathy. And may God bless you, sir, where you are going, sir, and may you have happy days yet; and if ever any of you wants a friend, Miss Martin and young ladies, why, don't forget Samuel Baxter, that's all! And I mean what I say, and say what I mean, as is my custom, as my good wife at home can tell you. And that reminds me, ladies, she told me to say that if she could be of any use in any way she'd be pleased and proud if you would let her know. And I was to say there would be a hamper ready for Thursday morning, because she knows what it is getting into a new house with everything to unpack and nothing ready to eat, and an invalid into the bargain; and she and I both think a lot of kitchen physic, and go in hard and fast for the wholesome *feeding-cure*! There! Don't say a word, Mr. Carisbroke; you're as tired as tired can be; we'll just say 'good-night,' and make ourselves scarce."

But a few words the ex-Rector insisted on saying, and perhaps he had never spoken with more real eloquence

than he did then, though his speech faltered a little, and tears glistened in his eyes. "Thank you, thank you, my friends," he said, earnestly; "you will never know how much you have cheered and comforted me, nor how greatly this expression of your kindly feeling has touched my heart. Thank you, too, for the sum you have so generously placed at my disposal. It is to me now comparative wealth. It is more to me at this moment than ten times the amount in days gone by. I have learned many things since I lay here; among them, I think, the true value of money, which I have so sinfully lavished and squandered, and suffered others to squander, unchecked. May God bless you all for your great kindness and forbearance, and may you be henceforth blessed with a pastor who will be, not a sluggard, as I have been, but a hearty, faithful worker in the vineyard which I have neglected."

And then Mr. Carisbroke could say no more—he fairly broke down, and the churchwarden and his friend, with a kindly nod to the ladies, left the room.

This was Monday evening, and Tuesday and Wednesday brought with them so many occupations, that the last night in the old house came, as it were, almost like a shock. Most of the furniture had been taken by the new Rector, at a valuation; the pictures, curiosities, "articles of *virtu*," &c., together with the fine collection of books, comprising some very rare editions, had gone to *Christie's* several weeks before. It had been arranged that the Misses Carisbroke should select, to the value of a certain sum, such furniture as would be useful to them in their new life, and accordingly they had chosen, under Meliora's guidance, chiefly such articles as were plain and strong, and calculated to serve their purpose.

Everything was packed now—what a weary packing it had been! Most of the luggage was gone on before, with the furniture; there remained only a few bags and bundles of wraps, and the usual accompaniments of a long journey. They supped for the last time in Mr. Carisbroke's room.

Happily Ruby slept, as Joan said, "like a cherub," and neither nurse nor child awoke till, in the cold February dawn, Meliora came in to say it was quite time to be stir-

ring. So, for the last time, Joan dressed herself in the old room, the little one sitting up in her cot and playing quietly the while. Breakfast was a hurried meal, and no one, except the twins, felt inclined to eat. Mr. Carisbroke was very silent; he took his tea and toast with scarcely a word, and quite distressed Joan when he motioned away the egg she had boiled for him.

Very, very heavily rested upon him now the burden of his past sin and folly. When he was left alone, he folded his hands and prayed, "Lord, grant that these children whom Thou hast given me may never curse me for the base selfishness which has brought them to this pass. Too late, too late I repent me of my great and criminal foolishness; I was not worthy to be a father, still less worthy was I to be a steward and minister of Thy Word. It is well that Thou hast taken from me the charge I so shamefully neglected. Oh, spare me a little before I go home, and am no more seen; let me, even at this eleventh hour, do some work in Thy vineyard. Never again may I minister in holy things, never speak the Word of Life to listening throngs, never administer Thy sacraments!—still—I may say some word for Thee, if Thou wilt give me the grace! I may, perchance, if Thou wilt so favour me, glorify Thee more in my weakness than in my strength, which I have abused. Ah! how I have wasted all that Thou didst so graciously heap upon me—health, talents, substance, portion, influence—life itself. And now I am laid aside like a broken vessel; the day is far spent, the night is at hand—the night in which no man may work. Yet is there forgiveness with Thee, and for the sake of Thy dear Son, I dare say, 'Pardon me, and lay not my sins any longer to my charge.'"

And just then Joan entered, with Ruby in her arms. She had seen the cloud on her father's brow, and she guessed how it was with him. She felt the trial keenly, she and her sisters; but their life was still before them all. They were young and vigorous, and they could hope and look onward in the far distance with all the buoyancy and elasticity of youth. With him it was otherwise; health, strength, and fortune, all were gone; the brightness of the morning and noontime lay behind him; and

though still at an age when many men are almost as vigorous and sanguine as ever, the shadows of the eventide were gathering thickly around him ; he was a feeble old man before his time.

So she came in with her little one, thinking to cheer her father, for it seemed to her that a look into Ruby's glowing, laughing face *must* be a cure for many a sorrow, and of late he had taken great notice of the child, and liked to have her with him. But at that moment the sight of the merry babe, all unconscious of the burdens of the life before her, rather added to his self-reproach. He kissed the soft little lips that were pressed to his as he lay on his pillows, and then said, "Take her away, Joan, my dear ; I cannot bear to see her ! She, too, must be homeless, and through me. Poor little Ruby, with such a father !"

"Now, papa dear," said Joan, authoritatively, "I won't have you scolding yourself ; and we are not going to be homeless, or anything like it, please God ! And Ruby is better off than any of us, for she will know no other life than the one she is going to ; she will not miss what we leave behind us. Now, papa darling, *don't fret*—pray, don't ! Try to say 'God's will be done !' "

"If it were but God's will ! If all this trouble were but of His sending ! Then, indeed, I could take comfort. But every bit of this terrible calamity is of my own deliberate seeking ; it is my own will, not God's, that has laid me low."

"Oh, no, no, papa ! It could not have happened, you know, if God had *not* willed it to be so ! It is certainly not His will that people should go wrong, I suppose, but He permits it sometimes that they may find out their mistakes, and come humbly to Him, and seek pardon and strength to do better ever after. Isn't that it, papa ?"

"It must be so, Joan. Why, it is you who are teaching me now."

"Oh, no, papa ! I never meant to take that upon myself," cried Joan, quite shocked at the idea. "I am only saying what you have taught me yourself."

"I am glad if I have taught you something good."

"You have taught me a great deal. And, papa, I do

think we may be happy in our new home, if we are patient and hopeful, and work away with a will."

"Yes, with God's blessing."

"With God's blessing, of course. Better a crust with His blessing than ever such sumptuous fare without it. And, papa dear, I have thought of the most delightful text, for removing! I wish I had time to illuminate it, I would put it up this very evening in our new house."

"What is your text, my dear?"

"It is, 'The Lord shall preserve thy going-out and thy coming-in from this time forth, and even for evermore.' It just applies to us, to all people who are going-out and coming-in, as we are to-day. Isn't it nice? I shall try to think of it as I go out of the gate there for the last time, and I will say to myself when I cross the threshold of the new home to-night, 'The Lord shall preserve thy coming-in.' I have heard that there is something in the Bible for everybody, and for all possible emergencies; but I never thought of looking for a moving-house-text, and it came into my mind all of a sudden when I was dressing. Is it not the very text we want?"

"It is, Joan; you are a dear child; you have comforted your poor old father no little. Now, my dear, leave me; I want to be alone—alone with God in this last hour at Perrywood."

A little later, and the mournful bustle of departure had begun; the carriage that was to convey Mr. Carisbroke to the Massington station was at the door, and once more Mr. Baxter was at hand to help to carry the ex-Rector downstairs. No word was spoken by any one as the sad procession passed on its way; the twins and their elder sisters had gone on before; Meliora, with Joan and Ruby, went with the Rector, who was Rector of Perrywood no longer, and never would be rector, or even curate, of any place again.

At the station they met Mrs. Baxter—Mr. Baxter had driven with them, on the box—and at once the good lady beckoned Meliora aside. "There, my dear," she said, "there is a nice little luncheon all ready in this basket; you'll need support by the way, and I dare say you made but poor breakfasts—I never can eat a mouthful when I

am going on a journey! Look! there are sandwiches, both ham and tongue, and a chicken ready cut up, and game-patties and cheesecakes for the twins. And in that flask there is sherry-and-water, and in this one brandy-and-water; it's never safe to travel without brandy when you have an invalid on your hands—though I don't hold with taking spirits, as a rule. And here's Lottie, with some oranges—some of half a box we got from Bristol through a sea-captain that's a second cousin of mine—and they are sweeter and juicier than any I have tasted this season. And that's all, I think. Oh, never mind about the plates and knives and forks. I'll make you a present of them; such things can't be too plentiful in a well-furnished house. And the hamper I spoke of is all safe in the van, with the other luggage. You had better open it at once when you get home, for there's a little of everything in it, you see, just to save you inconvenience till you begin to get somewhat into order. Of all things I hate cooking and providing in a new house; you don't know the shops, nor your kitchen range, nor where any earthly thing is, and you are sure to be dead-tired into the bargain. Just you rely on the hamper, and get to your beds as fast as you can to-night. And you'll write to me, won't you, when you are settled? And there, I declare, is Baxter waving for you to get into the carriage, and the guard is screeching for folks to take their seats! Good-bye, good-bye, Miss Martin, and God bless you all, and give you journeying mercies, and prosper you where you are going to. Good-bye."

And the good woman ran on till *Meliora* was fairly pushed into the train, so that it was impossible to thank her for all her kindness; which, indeed, was just what she had intended, for she said afterwards, as she was driving home with her husband and daughter, "I just kept on, and kept on—didn't I, Lottie?—so that Miss Martin couldn't get a word in edgeways, as she tried to begin thanking me so many times, but it was of no use, I was too many for her, clever though she is."

"Ah!" quoth Mr. Baxter, "trust my wife where her tongue is concerned! No one will ever beat thee, my lass, when it's a match as to who will talk longest.

Now, don't look cross ; just think what a blessing that hamper will be to them for the next day or two."

As indeed it was. For, as Mrs. Baxter had said, there was a little of everything in it, even to salt and pepper, and ready-made mustard. There was a sprinkling of groceries at the top, tea and sugar, and tapioca ; next thing bread and butter, eggs and savoury pie ; then sausages, and potted meats, pastry of various kinds, and finally, a well-roasted leg of mutton, a fine boiled ham, and two pairs of splendid fowls all ready to be eaten. They began their housekeeping at No. 1, Tennyson Place, "quite extravagantly," Meliora declared, for their larder was by no means empty even before that inexhaustible hamper was unpacked.

Mrs. May met them at the garden-gate, and bade them welcome to their own house so brightly, that Lavinia and Maggie forgot to shed the tears which they had supposed would come as a matter of course, when they beheld the narrowness and sordidness of their new habitation. The girls fell in love with Mrs. May straightway ; and Ruby went to her without a whimper. The best that Joan could say of her was that—"she seemed to be quite worthy to be Meliora's own sister !"

Mr. Carisbroke bore the journey better than his anxious family had ventured to expect, but he was much exhausted, and begged to be introduced to his room as soon as they arrived. The first thing that troubled him was the *noise* ! In so comparatively small a house it was impossible to prevent sounds being heard all over it, and poor tired Ruby's shrill cries when Joan began to undress her were so audible in her father's chamber that he became nervous and irritable, and insisted on her being quieted at any price. Also, as Tennyson Place stood on the highway, where there was a moderate amount of traffic at all hours, and was only divided from the road by little slips of garden and a low privet hedge, it followed that there was a good deal of noise from passing vehicles.

Lavinia and Margaret bemoaned the disturbance, which both Mrs. May and Meliora assured them was very slight for the neighbourhood of London ; and they would become accustomed to it in a few days. The twins turned up

their noses at their sleeping accommodation, and called their new residence "*a pigsty*."

Only Joan smiled cheerfully, while her sisters grumbled, and her father scolded, and poor Ruby, dreadfully sleepy and fretful, screamed as she had not screamed for months past.

"You are not out of heart?" said Meliora, when at last the child was asleep, the others fairly gone to bed, and she and Joan shut in for the night in the chamber they were to share together.

"No!" said Joan, stoutly, "I am not in the least down-hearted. The house is much larger and nicer than I expected; of course, it seems very cramped and bandboxy after Perrywood Rectory, which was in reality a mansion, far too spacious and grand for us. But we shall shake down quite comfortably soon, I am sure; and papa will be rested to-morrow, and sisters will have recovered their tempers; and, Meliora, I *did* ask God to bless our 'coming-in,' while I stood on the doorstep."

"Let us ask Him once more, and together, dear, before we sleep. I did think of having family prayer on this our first night, but everybody seemed so cross and out of sorts, and you could not leave Ruby, so I gave it up. But you and I will not lie down till this room, at least, is consecrated by mutual thanksgiving and supplication."



CHAPTER XXII.

FIVE YEARS LATER.

Oh, had they died together,
As flowers on the same stem
Wither in chilly weather,
Death had been sweet to them.

"THE most uneventful life has its changes, though they may transpire, as it were, all but imperceptibly! Still, at the close of a certain period, one finds, on looking back,

how great is the metamorphosis that has been accomplished during the interval which has elapsed since setting-out on what appeared to be an entirely new phase of existence. Old things that once seemed to us steadfast as the everlasting hills have passed away, and are no more seen; a change has stolen insidiously over the spirit of our dream; a fresh and altogether unlooked-for dispensation has been inaugurated! That which was, is not, and can never be again! That which was unlooked-for and unwished-for, has come to pass. We ourselves, though identically the same, are far otherwise than we were, in the unforgotten past."

So wrote Joan Carisbroke in her diary, one lovely April evening, five years after that dismal departure from Perrywood. She was still at Hampstead Heath, though no longer at No. 1, Tennyson Place. The school-keeping of the Misses Carisbrooke had prospered, and the small house which had served them at the commencement of their career was no longer spacious enough for them and for the pupils under their care. A substantial and roomy old mansion, standing in its own pleasant grounds on the verge of the Heath, had been to let, just as they found that they were inconveniently overflowing their borders; and two years earlier they had removed to their present abode, called "Chestnut House,"—from the fine spreading trees that almost surrounded it.

And Joan, as she wrote, was reviewing the family history, and wondering, somewhat idly, as she confessed to herself, what another five years might bring forth! She was a fine young woman now, of almost twenty years of age; some people called her handsome, but I think if I said that she was very good-looking, and of distinguished air and manner, I should more truthfully describe her, than if I gave her credit for actual beauty. She was tall and elegantly formed; she bore herself—so people said—like a princess, and there was a certain sweet graciousness about her, which generally enlisted the suffrages of strangers in her favour. Her eyes, hair, and complexion were all very dark. She was a pale, clear brunette, owing her deep charm of face, I am persuaded, to her noble, frank expression, and to her smile, which was truly enchanting, but rare as it was fascinating.

Not that Joan ever looked gloomy or desponding; there was always, or nearly always, a certain brightness on her countenance; but the brightness resembled the calm shining of the evening star rather than the gay sparkle of the sunbeam. Perhaps the shadows that had so early fallen about her had made her so grave and reticent, or, perhaps, it was that the responsibilities she had perforce prematurely assumed, gave to her this quiet and rather unyouthful demeanour, while yet in the blossom of her maidenhood. However it might be, I only know that no one, except, perhaps, Meliora, ever thought of Joan Carisbroke as "a girl"; no one ever dreamed of accosting her with the freedom that her years permitted; no one ever addressed her otherwise than with respect.

Lavinia was married, and gone with her husband to Australia. She had not made what people call "a good match," for the man whom she had taken to herself "for better, for worse," was neither wise, wealthy, nor particularly amiable. Nor had he been very much in love with Miss Carisbroke; but they happened to meet when he was just recovering from what is termed "a disappointment," the lady of his affections having most heartlessly jilted him for a far richer, far cleverer, and far more agreeable suitor. Mr. Carisbroke would fain have withheld his consent; but he quickly saw that his eldest daughter would do precisely as she chose; and what right had he, he asked himself painfully, to interfere? Lavinia was in her twenty-fourth year; she had never been content with the position which had been forced upon her by the breaking-up of the old life at Perrywood; she had accepted the inevitable as the inevitable, but the moment that choice was possible, she resolved to free herself from trammels she hated and despised. Also, as her father could not provide for her, nor even afford her a decent maintenance, was he justified in refusing his sanction to a step which gave her a protector for life?

He concluded that he was *not* justified; that she was of an age to decide for herself; that he could only advise her to the best of his ability, and then leave her to choose her own path, according to her own discretion.

And Meliora agreed with him; she foresaw a thousand complications if Lavinia were not permitted to follow her inclinations, which were day by day becoming firm resolves; in fact, she felt assured that the young lady was not to be controlled, that she would openly or covertly defy parental authority, and so bring disgrace upon the establishment with which her name was connected. Either she would take the law in her own hands, which, having attained her majority, she could do, or she would arrange an *elopement*, for which, like Lydia Languish, she had a secret preference. And the mere word "elopement" would certainly be ruinous to the prospects of her sisters, who were just beginning to rejoice in their success as schoolmistresses.

"It will never do," said Joan, with all the grave wisdom of her eighteen years; "marriage is always respectable provided it be not clandestine; no one can blame Miss Carisbroke for marrying, though terrible will be the reproaches hurled at her and at us should she be indiscreet enough to make a stolen march upon us. Lavinia's wedding must take place openly, with our full concurrence, and without delay, for 'courting' is certainly incongruous with school-keeping."

There was so much wisdom in this speech that all agreed to do their possible in forwarding Lavinia's marriage. The engagement was formally announced; Mr. Mander was presented to old friends as a member of the family, and before the conclusion of the next vacation, Mr. and Mrs. Mander had sailed for their new home in the Southern Hemisphere. Laden with all good wishes, and presents of every description, the young couple had left their native country.

Lavinia's departure, however, was not the first or only break in the household. While still busily working and striving in Tennyson Place, their first trouble, as governesses, had come to them. The measles had broken out in their neighbourhood, and very soon attacked the school. Two of the boarders were seized, and most of the day scholars were either invalided, or for the time withdrawn. The malady was not severe; it was but a mild form of measles, and no one suffered under the visitation. It was

so near the Easter recess that Meliora decided to break up the school a week before the proper time, and by a few days' extension of the usual holidays, she hoped to be quite quit of the infection before the children returned. It was an anxious time certainly, but all went well; the young patients quickly recovered, all proper sanitary measures were duly taken, and a week later than usual the school reassembled with augmented numbers and with a clean bill of health.

With one single exception! The twins had caught the measles at the outset; indeed, there were some suspicions that it was they who had imported the disease. They had it as favourably as their companions, and Brenda was soon up again, and occupied in nursing her sister, who, though not actually worse than the others, seemed in no great hurry to recover. It had always been known in the family that the twins were of feeble constitution as compared with the others; and now, a certain want of elasticity, or perhaps of vitality, was manifest, especially in the case of Netta, who, after her brief illness, seemed gradually, almost imperceptibly, to decline. She and Brenda were sent away to Hastings, in hope of a speedy cure being effected by change of air and saline breezes; and after a month's absence Brenda came back quite well, and rather more vigorous than formerly, but poor Netta in no wise strengthened or improved.

All through the summer she sank and sank, without any pronounced ailment, growing continually weaker, till at length, in the early autumn, she died, to the profound astonishment and extreme affliction of her twin sister. At first there were some fears that Brenda would follow Netta. Her grief was overpowering; nothing could rouse her, nothing induce her to occupy herself in any pursuit; even an exciting novel lying unread in her possession week after week. Her appetite utterly failed her, no dainties tempted, even the favourite champagne was languidly sipped, and at last positively refused. Part of her life seemed gone—part of herself was buried in the grave of her lost Netta. She only wanted “to be let alone”—“to die quietly, and be out of everybody's way!”

In vain Joan tried to be to her what Netta had been;

in vain Meliora invented all kinds of distractions to divert her mind, and contrived continual surprises; in vain Mr. Carisbroke talked to her, and gave her copying work to do. In vain was every effort for her relief, till one day, a strange thing happened.

Meliora's sister, Maud Clarke, came up from the country to spend a short time with the Carisbrokes. Netta had been very fond of her, and Brenda had been fond of her, too, but, perhaps, just a little jealous of a stranger's influence over her sister. Mrs. Clarke had paid two previous visits, and on both occasions had been very much with the twins, who, having no place in the busy schoolroom, had naturally their time a good deal at their own disposal. Netta had "taken to her immensely," and wept when she departed. Brenda also had liked their guest, but had secretly rejoiced when once more she had Netta "all to herself again." Now, when Maud came, Brenda instinctively flew to her for sympathy. Netta had loved Maud, she had talked about her in her last illness; therefore, Brenda must love Maud dearly. Maud quickly perceived the work that was awaiting her, and she gladly took it up.

One autumn evening, when everybody else was fully occupied, Mrs. Clarke and Brenda were left alone. Brenda was going over, for the fiftieth time, Netta's little properties, her workbox, her few trinkets, her bag of silks, all the trifles which had been to her, and were now to the surviving twin, inestimable treasures. Brenda put the last thing carefully away, then looked wistfully at her companion, and burst into tears.

"What is it, darling?" asked Maud, tenderly smoothing the dull braids of light hair, as the girl's head sank heavily upon her shoulder.

"Oh! don't you know?" was the almost passionate reply. "*She is gone! she will never, never come back to me! I can't live without her—I can't—I won't!*"

"It is but for a little while," said Maud, gently.

"How do you know that?" cried Brenda, fretfully. "I thought at first I should die, too, but I shan't, I know! I shall live to be an old woman, perhaps a very old woman! If I had not been awfully strong, I should be

dead now—of misery—something tells me I shall not die young as she did. Oh, my Netta!”

“Brenda, dear, it is God our Father who holds the thread of our lives; He takes some to Himself very early in the day, and they are spared all the troubles and temptations of the world; some are left till they have done a good day’s work; some toil on till set of sun—till they are very, *very* old! But the night comes to all, and in God’s good time He lays *His* kind hand on their weary eyelids, and they fall asleep. ‘He gives His beloved sleep.’ Do you understand, Brenda?”

“Yes; you mean the night of death, the sleep of the grave. But when it is morning, night is a long way off! and when one is very tired——” and again the tears gushed forth, and the plaintive voice was choked with sobs.

“The longest day seems short when it is over, my dear. A few years will be but a little while when they come to an end. If you should live to be old, still it will be to you only a little while when you meet dear Netta again.”

“I shall meet her again, then? You are *sure*?”

“I am sure that God will give back all that in His kindness He takes away. It was in love that he took Netta.”

“How can that be? He knew how much we loved each other—how we were part of each other, and always had been. Yet He took Netta, and left me alone. That was not kind; if any human person had done it, we should say he was *cruel*.”

“Even a human person may do a thing that *seems* cruel, and is yet most kind. Brenda, did you really love your sister, I wonder?”

“Did I not! Oh, Mrs. Clarke, I never knew till they told me she was dying, how much I loved her. We were always together, you see; we were born together, we lived together day and night. If we could but have *died* together!”

“If, then, you loved her so dearly, you should take comfort in remembering how much happier she is now than when she was on earth. Brenda, dear, pray that God will let you do His work in this world, and in His own

good time, when He sees best, take you to dwell for ever with Himself."

"If I only knew where she really is, and what she is doing without me!"

And then the poor child poured out her griefs and her misgivings, and Maud found that she knew just enough about God to make her greatly afraid of Him. She knew that Netta had often been naughty, and suppose now she were being *punished*! Oh! it was dreadful, too dreadful to think of.

"But," continued Brenda, wiping her eyes, "I don't think she was afraid to die, for she smiled so sweetly, and said she knew her sins would be forgiven her, for Jesus Christ's sake. He had lived for her, and died for her, and He would take her to Himself, and she would be with Him always and learn to please Him. Nobody heard her say so but me, and I have never told anybody but you. Do you think she is what people call *safe*?"

"I think—I have no doubt—she is with Christ the Lord. He taught her to come to Him. Brenda, dear, it only remains for you to go to Him, too. I think He is calling you now, and if Netta could speak from her grave she would bid you *come*!"

And from that evening Brenda was another person. A new soul seemed to come into her. She was never clever, never bright, as most girls are; and she was always so slow to comprehend, that out of her own family she was sure to be called "stupid." But she was no longer the selfish, untruthful child she had been. She awoke to a sense of her own responsibilities, of her duties to God and to her fellow-creatures; and she began to ask what was her *work* in the world, and how she was to do it well. She was always very shy, and slow to unfold her inner life to any one except Maud Clarke, and perhaps no one else really understood her, or held the key of her heart. No one could ever be to her what poor, dull Netta had been; but Maud became very dear to her, especially after one day when she spoke to her of her own sorrows, and treated her more like a grown woman than had been the case before. For though Brenda had wonderfully developed since her sister's death, she was still considered "weak-

minded," and almost as much of a child as little Ruby. It was Mrs. Clarke who first made a companion and an equal of her, and, by raising her in her own estimation, stimulated her to the cultivation of many qualities in which she was deficient.

It happened that one day Brenda was in unusually low spirits; a deep melancholy had come over her, and she sat for hours together silent and almost motionless, her hands idly crossed in her lap. She seemed falling into one of her old sad moods, in which it was useless to entreat or to exhort her; and Meliora did not like to command her, now that she was really grown-up, especially as there was something so sacred and so really touching in her sorrow. Maud at last came to the rescue, and, after some inward hesitation, spoke to her of the *sin* of such sullen, unprofitable grief. Had it been any one else, Brenda would probably have refused to open her lips; as it was, she looked at her friend reproachfully, and exclaimed—"Ah! you don't know!—you don't know!"

"But I do," answered Maud Clarke, gently; "I have known the saddest loss that a woman can know; you forget that I am a widow, Brenda."

"So I do," was the reply. "Never having seen or heard of your husband, I quite forgot that you were ever married. I forgot that there ever was a Mr. Clarke, but, of course, there must have been, and he was Laura's father."

"And Laura cannot remember him; she knows him only by his portrait. He died when she was very little, when he and I were both young people; and, Brenda, I loved him dearly—more dearly than you could comprehend, if you had not loved and lost your sister Netta."

"Were you *very* fond of him? Tell me about him."

It was one of Maud's peculiarities that she seldom, even to her sisters, spoke of her dead husband; his name was too sacred to be spoken to any ears but those of her child, and his memory too precious to be shared with any friend. Nevertheless, she forced herself now to comply with Brenda's request; and, strangely enough, after the first effort, she found a certain satisfaction, and

even pleasure, in giving the girl some account of his life, of their first meeting, of their happy married days, of his long illness, and of his death. And Brenda listened with the deepest interest and sympathy, and roused herself from the sullen apathy into which she was again falling. At last she said, "You must have been quite as unhappy as I am, perhaps more so, for I have always heard and read that the love that is between husband and wife is stronger and tenderer than any other, and so the loss must be greater. And yet, Maud——"

"Well, Brenda, what?"

"Yet you seem very happy now."

"I am very happy, now; I have been very happy for long."

"Then," said Brenda, with a little air of superiority, "I think I must be of a more constant and faithful nature than you are, for I am sure I shall never—no never! be happy again, as long as I live."

"I thought the same. Indeed, I prided myself on refusing all consolation. I liked to sit alone in the darkness and muse on the past, and nurse my hopeless sorrow. And I might have been still wasting my life thus, had not God sent me a kind and wise friend, who spoke to me just the words I needed, and showed me my foolishness and my ingratitude to Him who had but taken what He gave, what He *lent* to me for a season. He told me I was like Jonah, who was angry because his gourd withered, and a great deal more that I need not repeat. And, at first, I felt inclined to resent my friend's plain-speaking. I believe I told him that my sorrow was my own, my *life* my own, to do what I pleased with."

"And was it not so?"

"It was not. How could it be, Brenda? Do you not remember where it is written, '*Ye are not your own*'?"

"It is in the New Testament. Ah, I forgot that."

"So had I forgotten it. And, as I tell you, I was displeased with my friend, thinking that he had no right to interfere; so I would not at first acknowledge the force of his words, and I went on in my old way, caring for nothing, and burying myself and my sorrow together in selfish seclusion."

"And what made you different?"

"My child was taken very ill—so ill, that for days I thought I should lose her. That roused me; I found that I had still something to lose, that I might be still more desolate. In those long, weary nights of anxious watching and prayer God taught me how wrong I had been. My little Laura was spared to me, but I never relapsed, I am thankful to say, into that cold, dead, rebellious state of mind in which I was before. And, by-and-by, I saw how great a thing it was to be allowed to work for God, and I was sure there was work for me to do if I could only find it."

"And did you find it?"

"It came to me, I scarcely know how. No one ever sincerely desires work for God, and fails to find it. Even the poorest and the weakest have their appointed tasks, if they will only take them up—for *Christ's sake*."

"I wonder if there is any work for me?"

"There is plenty, dear, and it is not to seek. It lies about you, in your own home. First of all, you must do what you can to help your sisters and Meliora; then you may be a great comfort to your father; and last, but not least, you may be a blessing to the children and to the young people whom Providence has collected together under this roof."

"I never could speak of religion to the girls."

"Perhaps not, just yet. But you can live the Christian life, so that all may see that Christ is your Master. In a house like this, a Christian example may be of the greatest value."

"And you *are* happy?"

"Yes, more happy than most; thankful for many blessings; satisfied with my lot; willing to work and to wait till God shall call me home, and I see again those who are not lost but gone before."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRANK'S NEWS.

"To be weak is to be miserable."

You will wonder what has become of Mr. Frank Carisbroke all these years, and you will be agreeably surprised to learn that he has, to some extent, reformed—has not been out of a situation more than twice, and is not so very much in debt!

When first his family came to London, he manifested a decided intention of falling back upon them, on each and every emergency. Meliora, however, well supported by his sisters, so strenuously resisted these aggressions, that in a short time they were discontinued, and the young man began to consider seriously how he could exist with the largest amount of comfort and with some degree of respectability upon his own limited resources. He saw plainly that his father could no longer find the means he required, in order to live the life that was most pleasant in his sight, and he was beginning to discover that his business capabilities were not first-rate, and that it was only very slowly and painfully he could mount the commercial ladder, which he had once imagined he could scale, even to the topmost rung, at a bound or two, whenever he felt inclined to put the best foot foremost.

Still, he kept pretty steadily to work, and, as his manners were really attractive, he gave tolerable satisfaction to his employers. He quarrelled, however, with Canapie Bros. not many months after entering their employment. What was the grievance no one ever really knew. Mr. Frank Carisbroke merely informed his relations that these people were "terrible cads," and did not know how to treat a gentleman! Nevertheless, he was lucky enough to obtain a better situation, at a higher salary, in the course of a week or two, and he declared himself "tolerably satisfied, all things considered."

"Smithson and Co," on the other hand, professed themselves disappointed in the estimate they had formed

of Mr. Carisbroke. He did his work mechanically, even languidly; they wanted young men of energy and spirit, who could and would interest themselves in the business. Finally, they discovered that their gentlemanly clerk could be extremely impertinent; and one fine morning he found himself walking along the pavement of Cornhill, with a week's salary in his pocket, nothing to do, and, presumably, *minus* a reference. His first impulse was to go off to Hampstead, and tell his own people how shamefully he had been used; his next, to go and dine at the nearest restaurant, regardless of expense.

Accordingly, he indulged in a nice little dinner, or luncheon. He ordered *Sole à la Normande*, cutlets, ice-pudding, and lobster-salad, with a choice bottle of Moselle wherewith to crown the repast. It was so long—so very long, he told himself—since he had eaten a meal that was worth calling a dinner that no one—not even Meliora herself—could upbraid him for a solitary indulgence, especially at a moment when he was naturally dispirited, and felt just a peg too low, and had, moreover, the required sum in his breast-pocket!

"Why! she said herself the other day," he soliloquised, as he daintily picked over the salad, and thought it would only be proper to take a sip or two of Cognac after that; "she said all the mischief was done by going on the system of credit. As long as one could pay money down no great harm could be done! She is wrong, of course; the world could not go on without credit. Women always knock their heads against a post the moment they begin to legislate for men; but in this instance it's all right; I've got the cash, and it is my own to spend. I'm not going on tick, at any rate. I think I must have that Cognac, and a cup of black coffee. I have been living on such miserable plain fare for a year past that I should not wonder if I got horrible indigestion after a decent, regular tuck-in! And it won't do to let my health suffer; it's every man's duty to keep up his constitution. A man in my position must be able-bodied, or his mind won't go for much. Heigho! how comfortable I feel, ready to face the world! I wish I could have a bottle of that wine every day; it's A 1, by Jove! I wonder

how much they'll have the conscience to charge me for it !
Waiter ! ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Bring me a cup of *café noir*, and a little of your best Cognac—and—the *bill* ! ”

“ Certainly, sir.”

The coffee and the Cognac speedily arrived—the bill a little later. By the time that came, Frank was in a seventh heaven of lazy self-complacency. He pulled a long face, though, as he beheld the amount expended ; but he was too reckless now, and in too exalted a frame of mind, to care much about it. Not yet was the time for “ cool reflection.” He drew forth his money with the air of a grand Signor, tossed the waiter his expected fee, and felt sure he was mistaken for a West-end swell, amusing himself with experiences far east of Temple Bar. A supposition of this kind was quite enough to elate the weak soul of poor Frank Carisbroke.

Something like a qualm passed over him, though, as he remembered how greatly his small finances had been reduced by a single extravagance ; but the “ fizz,” as he had taught his twin-sisters to call the sparkling wine, had done its work well, and he would have looked at black-ruin just then through rose-coloured spectacles. A deferential bow from a well-dressed individual, sitting at a high mahogany desk near the entrance-lobby, completed the sense of illusion.

“ They take me for *somebody*,” he said, complacently, as he found himself again on the pavement outside ; “ they don’t bow like that to the fellow who sits an hour over his mutton chop and pint of porter, or makes his so-called luncheon on bread-and-cheese and watercresses and a glass of bitter beer ! ”

Then arose the question, What should he do with himself for the rest of the day ? He scorned the idea of returning to his quiet, unpretending home at Kennington, and yet it was too early for any evening entertainment. Should he carry out his first intention of going to Hampstead ? Afternoon school would be over by the time he reached Tennyson Place, and at least he would get a good cup of tea and a rest. He decided, however, *not* to pay this visit,

for it was a long way to go for so little; he cared not for the breezes of the Heath, and Meliora—confound her sharp-sightedness!—would be sure to find out his little game, and be down upon him without mercy. He felt very drowsy, and would have liked nothing better than to fling himself upon his own bed and sleep till the theatres were opened. Then a dose of strong tea, and a good play, with just a little relish of some kind by way of supper. After that he would return to economy and strict sobriety, and there would be an end of his little *spree*—the first he had had for many a day, and the last, no doubt, for, perhaps, another dreary twelve months.

Suddenly a bright idea struck him, as he found himself in the vicinity of a railway station. He would go in and inquire about the evening trains to some distant place—say, Portsmouth or Salisbury, or Plymouth—any one of them would do—carefully note down the time in his memorandum-book in the presence of the officials, and then seek the first-class waiting-room, where he could find repose on one of its luxurious couches. Waterloo would serve his purpose better than any other station, he reflected, for he would be in the vicinity of the Strand theatres when he awoke, and a decent cup of tea might doubtless be had in the refreshment-room.

Accordingly, he tramped on resolutely to Waterloo, resisting the temptation to take a hansom cab thither from the bottom of Fleet Street, and pluming himself no little on his magnanimous thrift. Arrived at the station, it flashed upon him that when people wait for a train they generally have some amount of luggage with them, and he had not even a bag or a travelling-rug, or an umbrella. Perhaps it would be best not to accost any of the porters; he would simply consult a “time-table,” which he would be sure to find in the waiting-room, and then coolly take possession of his temporary roost, and go to sleep for at least a couple of hours.

His plan answered excellently. He sauntered into the first-class waiting-room, which he found almost deserted—two important trains being just on the point of starting—and was able to choose his sofa. “If I had but a rug, now!” he murmured, as he extended himself upon the

velvet pile. "Why don't they give you pillows or cushions, I wonder, at these places? How mean and cheese-paring these Companies are!"

He was only disturbed once, though the room filled and emptied twice over. A loud-voiced guard put his head in at the swinging door, and, finding no one present, save the sleeper, awoke him to know if he was the gent as was for the 6.20 down express? Peevishly Frank turned over, forgetting where he was, exclaiming that he had nothing to do with any train; then, suddenly remembering himself, he began to explain that he had fallen very fast asleep after his long journey from the North, and was going on by the 7.30 mail. But the guard was gone; and he slept again till it was time to get up, pull himself together, and procure a cup of tea. He was no longer in a felicitous state of mind; his dinner *had* disagreed with him, he decided, and that bottle of fizz could not have been a good one, or his head would never ache so splittingly!

However, a cup of tea was always good for headache, and he went to find it, and also the means of procuring a good wash. He felt better when he had had his tea, and made a hasty toilet; and the breeze from the river, as he loitered on Waterloo Bridge, almost completed the cure. He was quite in high feather again by the time he reached the Strand, and paused to consider which of the many theatres close at hand he should patronise. There was a very good play on at the Adelphi, he remembered, and thither he went, and took no note of time till the curtain fell upon the closing scene. Then he sprang up and went to look for his supper, which in the vicinity of a theatre is never far to seek; and he enjoyed himself so much, that when he came out into Trafalgar Square, he was astonished to hear Big Ben solemnly announcing midnight.

Somehow, the road to Kennington seemed that night twice as long as ever it had been before; even the span of Westminster Bridge had, as it appeared to him, increased by several wide arches. And, oh! that weary, Kennington Road! surely it wickedly lengthened itself out as he dragged his weary way along it! He began to wonder whether he was under a spell, which made him

turn unaware and retrace his steps, for when he reached the end of Kennington Lane, he felt sure he had been there already half-a-dozen times that night. It was one o'clock when he knocked at the door of his lodgings—his landlady did not allow a latch-key—and tried to apologise for his lateness. What the good woman said he could not understand; he stumbled upstairs to his room and remembered no more till the sunshine and the sounds in the street told him that another morning was well on its way to noon.

And now came reaction. He felt dismally ill, as well he might; he had spent nearly all the money he had in the world; he was out of a situation, and he had in his purse barely enough to pay Mrs. McKenna's weekly bill, which was due the day after to-morrow. He felt that he had been a fool, that he had flung away upon the mean pleasures of the hour what would have sufficed for legitimate expenses for several weeks to come. Oh, how his head throbbed and burned! how the sight of the frugal breakfast on the table revolted him! He threw himself back in his chair, and his weak nature dissolved in tears. He was too ill that day to go to Hampstead with the sad news of his dismissal, and good Mrs. McKenna doctored him with camomile tea, and forced him to swallow a basinful of gruel, which she conceived to be the panacea of all ills that flesh is heir to. And she lectured him in grave motherly fashion, and was sure he must have fallen in with bad companions, who had tempted him to folly! Alas! it was the worst feature in Frank's case that he needed no insidious tempter to lead him wrong; a worse companion than himself it would be difficult to find.

There was mourning in Tennyson Place, when the young man, with many lamentations, and also with certain reservations, told his miserable story, and Meliora began to be afraid that, for a while at least, they must be saddled with his maintenance, as he could not be left to starve, however much he merited privation. Fortune, however, once more befriended him in the person of Mr. May, Meliora's brother-in-law. Once more he went every morning to business; once more he was in the receipt of a

weekly salary, and he made such professions of repentance for past sins, and promised so earnestly for the future, that even Meliora began to hope that Mr. Carisbroke might at last find some pride and comfort in his only son !

And as time went on, it seemed as if this hope, shadowy and unsubstantial at first, was really to be fulfilled. Frank not only kept his situation in Mr. Warner's office, where he had been received at Mr. May's instance—taken on trial—but obtained in some measure the confidence of his employers. He had been fairly frightened at the position in which he found himself after his dismissal by Smithson and Co., and he had learned to distrust *himself*—perhaps the most wholesome lesson he could have learned under any circumstances. He was now twenty-seven years of age ; he was receiving a very fair salary ; he lived in the neighbourhood of Camden Town, which was not then such a wilderness of bricks and mortar as it is now, and his landlady always spoke of him as a “ very nice and honourable young gentleman, who conducted himself respectably, and owed nothing to nobody.”

Which to a certain extent was the truth. Frank did pay his bills pretty regularly, but he was always a little behindhand, and always drawing on the future. He received his salary now every month, and every penny of it was generally due when it came into his hands ; consequently, he never had any ready-money to speak of, and he wished continually for a fairy god-mother who would just once in a while bestow upon him a purse of gold, and free him from the bondage of impecuniosity. But this state of things was not known at Chestnut House, and it was thankfully believed that poor Frank had really “ turned over a new leaf,” as, indeed, in many ways, he actually had.

Mr. Carisbroke was in pretty much the same condition as he had been when leaving Perrywood. He was certainly better and stronger in himself, and not nearly so helpless as in his first affliction ; but he was feeble enough at his best, and no doctor gave any hope of restoration such as he had once cherished, and such as his family, even now, would not believe to be impossible. His health was not bad, and in the summer he could be drawn about in a bath-chair ; he did occasional literary work, which

from time to time brought him in a few guineas, and as the school increased and prospered he began to find pleasure in giving lessons to the elder pupils, till at last it came to be understood that he was entirely responsible for a Latin and science class, which contributed very much to the *prestige* of the establishment. And, of course, it followed quite naturally that he should take a weekly Bible-class, and act as chaplain pretty regularly to his own household.

Altogether Meliora and Joan felt that they had much to be thankful for, and everything to encourage them in the work they had undertaken. I need not tell you that the half-yearly bills, in a house of which Meliora was the guiding spirit, were few and quickly discharged. She and Joan never rested till they had enough in hand to meet current expenses without anticipating future supplies; while the number of pupils was continually augmented, and the class from which they came greatly improved. The Misses Carisbroke—Meliora would never allow her name to appear on the prospectus—were able to raise their terms when they went to Chestnut House, and it was quickly evident that the step they had taken was most wise.

To go back to the evening when I showed you Joan—a woman of twenty, writing in the deserted schoolroom. It was the close of the Easter recess—Monday evening—and the children were coming back on the following morning. All the pupils had gone home, except two Indian girls, and they were visiting friends at Stoke Newington. Joan had had a complete holiday, the first she had known for many years; for something had always happened before to provide her with extra occupation as soon as ever she seemed likely to enjoy extra leisure. But this had been a real rest—a delicious breathing-time—and she was heartily thankful for it, and felt fresh vigour for the new campaign of toil and responsibility that was close at hand.

She laid down her pen and closed her book. The air was soft and golden, the evening sunbeams shone brightly on the swelling chestnut buds and turned them into lamps of ruddy bronze; the beds in the garden were gay with many-coloured hyacinths, or all aflame with red anemones

and early tulips; by-and-by there would be the scent of lilacs and of hawthorn on the breeze, and ere long, those gleaming horse-chestnut buds would expand into tender green palms, and gorgeous spirals of white and delicately-tinted rose and pale yellow. Never before had Joan looked forward so happily to the time of leaves and flowers—the sweet, happy summer-time, that would bring fragrant warmth, and lilies and roses, and all wealth and glory of foliage and bloom.

She was thinking of Perrywood, yet scarcely regretting its well-remembered scenes; for though, now, she worked hard for her daily bread, and enjoyed few luxuries and had lost *caste*, as she sometimes proudly told herself, by becoming a professed schoolmistress, her position was assured. It might be humble, but it was *safe*; it was real and substantial. What they had they actually possessed; what they spent they could honestly afford. They had to work hard and eat the bread of carefulness and labour; but they could have all that was necessary, and a little more, and they owed nothing which it would inconvenience them to pay at any moment. Very soon both Joan and Meliora thought it might be possible to form the nucleus of a surplus fund, not to be touched while their present prosperity continued.

Sunset was painting the western skies, when Joan heard a footstep on the gravel walk. She glanced out, and saw her brother, looking very well and happy, approaching the house. Brenda, who was just coming up with little Ruby by the hand, met him as he reached the large, old-fashioned portico.

“Well! young lady! and how are you?” she heard Frank say, as he lifted Ruby from the ground, and gave her a little toss into the air. “How glad I am I have one sister not too big to be played with. You do look rosy and fresh, little one. You deserve your name! Joan must have been a witch when she gave it to you, for we none of us thought what a bonnie jewel you would turn out to be—did we, Brenda?”

And, in truth, Ruby had grown into a wonderfully beautiful girl, as sweet and good, and altogether charming as she was lovely. To say that Joan loved her almost to idolatry

would not be to exaggerate her feelings. And Ruby was now in her seventh year, but so tall that she was often supposed to be nine or ten. She was very fond of Frank, who petted her whenever he came to Chestnut House. He was, on the whole, affectionately disposed towards his sisters, and liked their society so long as they demanded from him no personal sacrifice. And things had gone so smoothly for so many months that Frank's visits were always now pleasurable.

Then Joan heard him speak kindly to Brenda, and ask if she had mustered courage to get rid of the tooth that had tormented her all through the winter, and then he inquired where the others were, for he had a grand piece of news for them.

"And may I not hear it?" asked Brenda, in the almost childish tones that still appertained to her, in spite of the great development of character that had taken place since poor Netta's death.

"Oh yes, you may hear it, of course," was the reply. "My news is for all of you. Where is Joan? Where is Meliora?"

"Here is Joan," said that young woman, putting her head through the open window. "I am at your service, Frank. Go into the back drawing-room, please, for papa is there, and I think Maggie and Meliora. I will be down immediately."

"Well, Frank!" said Maggie, as he entered the room where all three were sitting, Mr. Carisbroke putting the finishing stroke to an MS. that was bespoken by a celebrated publisher, Meliora making up the month's accounts, Maggie herself busy on what the Scotch call "white work," for she was thinking seriously of going out to join the Manders, and was already occupied with her outfit. "Well, Frank, you do look bright this evening! You bring us some good news, I am sure."

"Yes, very good news! At least, I hope you will all take it as such."

"You have got that situation you heard of the other day?"

"No, I have not; for when I came to inquire about it, I found that there was too much work, and too little pay."

But my salary at Mr. Warner's will be raised again at Michaelmas, and 'a rolling-stone gathers no moss,' you know."

"I am glad you have come to that conclusion," said Meliora, approvingly. "And I do think, from what I hear, that you give great satisfaction to Mr. Warner. He trusts you, I am sure."

"I believe he does," answered Frank, a little airily; "and he behaves very well—he knows I am a gentleman, and treats me as such. I should not wonder if, presently, he took me into partnership; ours is a rapidly-improving business."

"Oh, Frank," interrupted Joan, "I would not build on that if I were you! Mr. Warner has two sons, and one of them is just ready for the counting-house. The firm will be 'Warner and Sons,' depend upon it."

"I don't know. Of course, what I say here is entirely between ourselves."

"Of course; but the news, Frank?"

"Ah! the news?" cried the others.

"Well, guess!"

"No, I cannot. Don't keep us in suspense, Frank, or you will be indicted for 'cruelty to animals.'"

It was Joan who spoke.

"Well, then—I am going—to be married!"

"Are you in earnest?" asked Joan, gravely.

"You are making fun of us," cried Maggie, with a laugh. "Tell that to the marines, Frank!"

"I would not jest upon such a subject if I were you," said Meliora. "Death and marriage should be sacred from jokes."

"Oh, come now!" put in Brenda, "you can't make us believe *that*!"

Mr. Carisbroke was silent, but evidently incredulous.

"Well, I am much obliged to you all, I am sure," said Frank, with an offended air. "Am I such a bad-looking fellow that the girls should all run away from me? And I am no boy not to know my own mind! If a man does not think of settling at twenty-seven, getting on for twenty-eight, indeed—when is he to think of it?"

"You are quite old enough to be already married," re-

plied his father; "and, as a rule, I approve of early marriages; provided, of course, that they are not *too* early—and not *imprudent*—which may be the case at thirty, as well as at twenty. What are you going to live on, may I ask?"

"On my income, sir. I shall have £150 a-year at Michaelmas. Surely that is enough to live on, in a quiet way."

"In a very quiet way, perhaps! But, Frank, you are *my* son, and I am afraid you inherit a mania for spending. A hundred and fifty pounds per annum is not much, especially in London; and generally speaking, a man's expenses increase after marriage."

"And with increase of expenditure comes increase of means, in nine cases out of ten. I—that is to say, *we* shall rub on, never fear."

"And the '*we*'? Who is the young lady?"

"You don't know her; her name is Ada Cook. She is the very prettiest little darling you ever set eyes upon, full of fun, and *such a voice*! Such a soprano as one seldom hears."

"Where did you meet her?" asked Joan.

"Oh, at the choral meetings we had this winter. I've seen her twice a week ever since last November, so I ought to know something about her. And she has been staying with Mrs. Somers, too."

"Mrs. Somers! Your landlady?"

"Yes; Ada is her niece. I hope you do not despise her because her aunt has to let lodgings?"

"Certainly not," said Joan. "But, Frank, we thought Mrs. Somers a very affected and pretentious person. She talked quite too much about 'the better days' she had seen, and was evidently anxious to impress upon us that she was not *born* to let lodgings."

"Ah! that is her little weakness. We all have some little foible, you know! And Mrs. Somers has really been very well off, and moved in the best society. Anyhow Ada is not responsible for her aunt."

"Has Miss Cook any parents?"

"She has a mother. I cannot say I like her; and she has sisters of whom I do not approve; but I am not going

to marry the family of the Cooks. I shall keep Ada, when she is my wife, all to myself."

"That is more easily said than done," remarked Meliora. "However, I, for one, will form no opinion of your choice till I have seen Miss Cook herself."

And then it was agreed that Miss Cook should be presented at Chestnut House as soon as convenient. Frank willingly acquiesced, and promised to bring his betrothed to tea and supper on Friday evening next.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COOK FAMILY.

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the spider to the fly.
"Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy!"

ADA COOK was certainly a very pretty little specimen of the feminine gender. That is to say, she had silky brown hair, a lovely complexion, regular features, almond-shaped blue eyes, and pouting lips like rosebuds! She had always been considered—as indeed she was—the beauty of the family, and was the spoilt darling of a mother who had deluded herself into the belief that the form and face her own youth rejoiced in were reproduced in this beloved daughter.

Frank Carisbroke thought himself one of the most thoroughly wide-awake of marriageable men, and he had frequently laughed at foolish young fellows who had carried their flirtations just a little too far, and been "taken in and done for," as a natural consequence. He little knew how precisely this had been his own condition—how skilfully he had been angled for, caught, and landed on the shore of a declared matrimonial engagement. That he was tolerably safe from all such snares and man-traps seemed self-evident, for he had neither income nor

position which could make him a desirable husband for a petted, self-willed beauty who appraised her charms at their utmost value, and declared herself passionately fond of "society."

But Frank, though not exactly a vulgar boaster, had always managed to inspire his friends and acquaintances with strong ideas of his own superiority, both as regarded future prospects and social position. Everybody about him knew that he was an Oxford man, though no one but his own family knew how his University career had ended. It was generally understood that his father had been unfortunate, having lost a large private income and his health almost simultaneously; but then a clergyman was always a clergyman, and the name of Carisbroke in itself would always command respect! And Frank had the manners and appearance of a gentleman, and he dressed well, and talked largely, and altogether comported himself as one of the "upper ten," who had suffered reverses.

Frank had taken a little fit of Ritualism that winter, and had gone to church pretty frequently. There was a surpliced choir on Sundays, but on Saints' days and week-evenings the young people of the congregation led the "service of song" to their own great satisfaction, and to that of the congregation generally. All the Misses Cooks had "voices," and all sang in the amateur choir, and twice a-week they assembled in the schoolrooms of St. Ursula for practice and rehearsal. Now the organist was not at all "High Church;" he had very little sympathy with Gregorians and service-chants and intonations, such as the young ladies gloried in, and he grumbled and growled not a little when he was asked to be present on these practising evenings; and as he found the extra work was to be included in his present salary, he very frequently was nowhere to be found when the time came for the organist to lead.

Several of the young ladies tried their skill, but, being only pianoforte players, failed ignominiously. Then it came to pass that Frank Carisbroke, who had sometimes played the organ at Perrywood, and had really musical tastes, modestly offered his services. He was quite out of

organ-practice, did not know the tunes, &c., but he thought his playing would be better than *none*; at any rate, if they would allow him, he would try what he could do! And being one of those persons who can make a little knowledge go a long way, and not being at all troubled with bashfulness, he managed to acquit himself so well that he received the hearty thanks of the choir and of the vicar himself, and was implored to preside at the organ on all similar occasions.

The practising quickly became a rage; nothing was talked of or thought about but Church-music; and Frank, when he went to Chestnut House, almost drove his sisters wild in his vain attempts to infect them with what Joan called the Chant and Anthem fever! They did not, however, discourage him, because they concluded that his present hobby was both a safe and inexpensive one, could do him no harm, and might possibly do him good. But as the winter began to pass into early spring very little was seen of Frank Carisbroke at Chestnut House.

Mrs. Somers, Frank's landlady, neither played nor sang herself, and was reported not to know the difference between the "Old Hundredth" and "Polly put the kettle on!" But her front parlour and an ancient piano which she possessed were always at the service of the practisers; while Mrs. Cook, her sister, who rejoiced in a "drawing-room" with folding-doors, went so far as to hire a grand new instrument, of an almost fabulous number of octaves, with all the modern improvements, for the benefit of the young people; and Frank and two of the Misses Cook, Ada and Anna Matilda, had the honour of choosing it.

Frank had been so flattered and bepraised that he had come to believe in himself as an actual musical genius, and he required very little persuasion to induce him to play first fiddle, or "first piano" rather, on every possible occasion. He and the Misses Cook were very much thrown together; he was always welcome at Mrs. Cook's supper-table, and it came to be quite a regular thing that he should spend the Sunday afternoon in that irreproachable matron's rather incongruously-furnished drawing-room. After awhile it grew also to be a regular thing

that he and Ada should have the drawing-room to themselves, and about the same time he made the curious discovery that Ada and Anna Matilda were no longer on speaking terms! He asked Rosamond, the eldest of the Misses Cook, what had caused the estrangement, but could get no adequate explanation. Then he asked Emmeline, the youngest daughter, commonly called Lina, and she—an indiscreet maiden of fourteen or thereabouts—giggled and blushed, and at last informed him that he must be a “pretty soft if he did not see which way the wind blew!” An observation that only augmented the young man’s mystification, and did not tend to increase his admiration of Miss Lina.

At length affairs came to a crisis. There arrived an evening, when Frank, presenting himself, as usual, a little before eight o’clock, at Lupin Villa, with a roll of music in his hand, and a choice rosebud in his button-hole, found himself alone and face to face with Mrs. Cook, who was wearing a grand new cap and the gravest of countenances. Though quite at home at Lupin Villa, and not very easily abashed, Frank felt slightly embarrassed, for he saw plainly enough that he was in for a solemn *lête-à-lête* with his hostess. All the house was silent; there was no trace of “the girls” anywhere to be discerned. The pianoforte was closed, and the music neatly piled up in a corner of the room. There were no littering work-baskets on the table; the photographic albums were all put away; not a library-book or railway-novel was to be seen; everything was in apple-pie order, and strict decorum was evidently the order of the evening.

“Good evening, Mrs. Cook,” said Frank, cheerfully, but with a little nervous shake in his voice notwithstanding.

“Good evening, Mr. Carisbroke,” in a voice as dismal as though she had just returned from weeping over the tomb of the late Daniel Nathaniel Cook, Esquire!

“I am afraid it is going to rain,” said Frank, falling back on the Englishman’s resource, from sheer lack of anything else to say. The stars had shone brightly when he knocked at the door of Lupin Villa, and the air was unusually frosty for the last week in March. There was no more prospect of rain that night than there was of sun-

shine! The subject of the weather did not seem to interest Mrs. Cook, for she made no reply, but continued to look her visitor steadily in the face. The young man began to feel very uneasy. Surely, she had not listened to certain episodes of his former life, when he was "unsteady"—that little affair at Oxford that had shocked Meliora so much, for instance. Mrs. Cook *looked* volumes, but she did not speak. The silence was terrible; it was a "horrid pause," and no mistake, and Frank was fast growing desperate. At length he gained courage to ask, "Where are all the young ladies to-night, Mrs. Cook?"

"They are otherwise engaged, Mr. Carisbroke."

"What a pity! I have such a lovely duet here—the treble will just suit Ada."

"It is of Ada that I must speak to you, Mr. Carisbroke,—my dear, innocent, fatherless little Ada!"

"I hope she is not ill?"

"She is far from well; *very* far from well, Mr. Carisbroke! I am deeply, *deeply* anxious about my precious child. Ah! there is nothing like a mother's anxieties!"

"I hope Ada is not consumptive?" asked Frank, quite earnestly, for he remembered that on Sunday evening she had coughed a good deal as they were walking through Oakley Square together, and he had given her a lozenge, and recommended linseed-tea, for it would be such a pity if anything happened to interfere with her singing. And since Sunday evening the young people had not met.

"I trust not! oh! I trust not, Mr. Carisbroke!" returned the lady, emphatically; "but there is no knowing; and when there is something on the mind the general health is sure to suffer, and who can tell where it may end? I knew a very sweet girl once, and her affections were trifled with, and she just faded and drooped away,—like *something* on the Monument smiling at grief, as the poet Shakespeare says;—though why any girl in her senses should go up to the top of the Monument to fret passes my comprehension. Only, I suppose, poets don't go in for common sense, or anything of that sort."

"I am sure I hope no one will trifle with Miss Ada's affections," said Frank, stupidly, hardly knowing what to reply.

"Ah! there's many a heartless trifler,—many a gay deceiver!"

Frank could have groaned. How he wished himself at that moment on the top of the Monument, although rheumatism should be the result of so imprudent a position! Clearly Mrs. Cook was mentally accusing him of trifling, or of deceiving, or both. He was beginning to think what excuse he could make for immediate departure. Should he go mad on the spot with raging toothache? or suddenly remember an engagement at Camberwell? But while he deliberated, the lady again took up her parable. "Mr. Carisbroke, your own heart must tell you to whom I am alluding. You have a conscience, I presume?"

Frank meekly hoped he had! He was not quite sure on that point himself. Mrs. Cook resumed:—"And, as a clergyman's son, a very *tender* conscience, probably. Oh, Mr. Carisbroke, if you had not been who you are, and nurtured in piety under the very shadow of our beloved Church, I should never have allowed this close intimacy with my darling girls. Mr. Carisbroke, I hope—I hope I have not been too confiding. Daniel Nathaniel, with his dying breath, said to me, 'Take every care of our daughters, especially of Ada, for she will be a bright, particular star!'"

"Well, Mrs. Cook!" Frank was beginning to grow impatient.

"Mr. Carisbroke!" continued the matron, with an air of severity, "I fear you are callous; you wilfully refuse to comprehend; it therefore becomes my painful duty as a mother—and never yet have I hesitated to obey the call of duty!—to ask you with what intentions you spend your evenings under this humble roof? Do you imagine that a creature so lovely as my Ada fails to attract attention in every quarter? Do you not know how spiteful the world is? how ruthless is the tongue of slander?"

"I'm sure I never meant"—began Frank, nervously. He would have compounded for an excruciating toothache, if only it had enabled him to escape his merciless tormentor. He even looked at the door longingly, but decided *not* to bolt.

"Then you ought to have meant, Mr. Carisbroke; I say it advisedly. Here's all the neighbourhood, all St. Ursula's congregation, saying that you and my Ada are engaged!—yes, *engaged*! The Miss Robertses called only yesterday to congratulate, and Fanny Hammond wants to know 'when it's to be.' And is it surprising that people should talk, and come to conclusions, when you walk Ada home from church every Sunday and practising night? and don't you bring her music and flowers? and isn't this very room, the front drawing-room, given up to you and Ada continually, and don't you always seem glad enough to get her to yourself?"

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Cook—I——"

"And so am I, Mr. Carisbroke. Of course, when Ada heard how people were talking, she was shocked—that shocked that she cried herself quite ill. And, says she—'Oh, ma! what *shall* I do? Frank is very kind to me, and as attentive as the most adoring of lovers, but he is not my lover. He has never said one word that meant anything; he's rather fond of me, perhaps, but he is quite as fond of Anna Matilda. And I know he is far above me, and might marry a lady of the land; and people will say unkind things, and I shall die.' Dear, sensitive child, her delicacy is wounded, and, I fear—I fear her tender, innocent heart is touched. Oh, that we had never seen you, Mr. Carisbroke!"

Frank was silent. He was obliged to confess to himself that he had gone a long way with Ada, much farther than her mother knew, or was supposed to know. He had praised her voice, her beauty, her pretty white hands, her gay spirits; he had brought her flowers and books and music, and stolen—he had even stolen—a kiss or two! and at tea and supper he took, as a matter of course, the seat next to Ada. He had comported himself like a lover, but he had never actually compromised himself by speech or written word; even if he married that mythical "lady of the land," to whom reference had been made, Ada Cook would be in no position to bring an action against him for "breach of promise!" He had called her "a darling," and a "a pet," more than once; but he had not asked her, even indirectly, to be engaged to him; and as for letters,

those he had written to her would no more have served her turn in court than did the immortal "chops and tomato sauce," of Pickwickian memory! Such notes as this she had in her possession:—"Dear Ada,—Don't omit to practise that minor passage. Could not we manage 'By the Waters of Babylon' next Thursday? Will get the score of *Judas Maccabæus*."

Still, all the conscience he had testified against him; and more than this, it would be extremely disagreeable to him to be outlawed, as it were, from the pleasant circle in which for the last few months he had passed his leisure time so happily. Now he came to think of it, he did like Ada very much. She was a dear little pet! quite the prettiest girl he knew, and she was certainly rather partial to him. At any rate, if he proposed, he would not be refused; and it would be really cruel to excite hopes and then crush them out ruthlessly by politely saying, "Good-bye," and returning no more to Lupin Villa.

"I never saw a girl I liked so much as Ada," he said, slowly, as soon as Mrs. Cook would give him a chance of speaking. "The gossips have been premature, that is all. If you will give me Ada, Mrs. Cook, I shall be only too happy to be engaged to her. But I must tell you plainly that I am not at present in a position to marry."

"Oh, that will be all right!" said she, her face beaming with satisfaction. "I am not a worldly mother, as you know. Of course I should have liked my beautiful Ada to marry to her carriage, and she would grace the highest position; but wealth is not everything, and true love is worth all the rest, isn't it now?"

Thus appealed to, Frank could only declare that he was precisely of that opinion, and might he not see Ada before he left.

"Oh, now it's all right, of course you'll stop and have a bit of supper with us. The girl is rattling the knives now, I hear. I'll send Ada to you directly."

Left alone, Frank reviewed his position. He was as good as engaged now, and all that remained was to make the best of it. Ada really was very charming, and he might go farther and fare worse. She had some plebeian ways, certainly, but she was the least vulgar of

the sisters, and certainly the sweetest tempered, as she was the prettiest. As for Anna Matilda, not all the mothers in Christendom would have cajoled him into having her, for she was rather dashing than handsome; her voice was not to be compared with Ada's; he had more than once seen her knife between her rosy lips, and she had a sharp and shrewish tongue. Ada could be easily improved, and once married to her, he would take care she saw very little of her own family.

His reverie was interrupted by Ada herself, who came in, blushing very prettily, and saying, "Ma says you have something to say to me, Mr. Carisbroke."

"I have something to say—something most important. Can't you guess what it is, Ada?"

"Oh, how should I know?" answered the young lady, coquettishly, tossing back her glossy brown ringlets, and trying to look unconscious.

And then it was all poured forth—the old, old story, that all Eve's sons and daughters are fated, sooner or later, to tell or to listen to. And as it was told Frank tried to believe that he was very much in earnest, that he was passionately in love with Ada, and that without her the world would be a howling wilderness!

It was almost ten o'clock when supper was at last announced, and the betrothed pair went downstairs arm-in-arm to the breakfast-room, on the basement story, where all the meals were taken; and one look was sufficient to satisfy the anxious relict of Daniel Nathaniel that all was as she wished. "Bless you both!" she cried, trying to encompass them in one embrace, and fervently kissing first one and then the other, finally relapsing into tears, that threatened to become hysterical. But a smelling-bottle and a little brandy-and-water judiciously administered by the practical Rosamond soon restored her equanimity.

"If we had only known what auspicious event would occur to-night," she said, when the last tear was wiped away, and Lina dispatched upstairs for a clean pocket-handkerchief, "we would have had a supper worthy of the occasion. But that will keep, won't it? As it is, we've nothing but sausages and mashed potatoes, besides the

bread-and-cheese. Never mind, love is a sauce that relishes even bread-and-cheese, ain't it, Frank?"

It was as much as Frank could do not to wince openly. He did not like being called "Frank" by his mother-in-law elect, and he had not bargained for her kisses as a supplement to Ada's. And the sausages were over done, which was probably his fault and Ada's, and the supper-beer, fetched by "the girl" from the nearest public-house, was lamentably small and flat. Also, there were many little lapses of good manners to be observed on the part of those who surrounded the table. Frank—Mr. Carisbroke no longer—was one of the family now, and he was no longer to be treated to best dresses and best behaviour on ordinary occasions. His engagement was not an hour old when he resolved, almost solemnly, that on his wedding-day he would cut the whole connection.

Several weeks elapsed before Frank summoned courage to inform his father and his sisters of his changed position; nor would he have spoken as quickly as he did, had not Ada wearied him with her importunities to be introduced to "her new relations."

"It is not treating me respectfully," she said on the third Sunday, as they walked home from St. Ursula's together. "I know enough of the best society to be aware that a gentleman always introduces his bride to his own family as soon as ever she accepts him—and we have been engaged almost three weeks."

"Very often—in most cases, indeed," said Frank, quite thoughtlessly, "the family and the young lady are intimate beforehand."

"And so we ought to have been!" rejoined Ada, with considerable spirit. "Ma was saying only this morning that she wondered you hadn't brought your sisters to Lupin Villa long ago! And Anna Matilda said, in her nasty tone, she didn't expect your sisters would ever see the inside of Lupin Villa; and she wondered I hadn't too much pride to go into a family that didn't hold out both hands and welcome me with open arms. As if she knew anything about it! It's my belief she is going to disgrace us all by a low marriage."

"Indeed, I hope not."

"Ah! I know what I know! It was *you* she wanted, you know, and that made her so unpleasant when you paid me so much open attention, and my name—not hers—was coupled with yours. But she is determined not to be outdone, and she vows she will be married now before we are, though she is not yet engaged."

"Very likely; for as I told you, my darling, I am so poor that I cannot make a home for you yet awhile—not the home that is worthy of you. I could not take my sweet bride to 'apartments,' could I?"

"Of course not. But we might have a nice house of our own, might we not—a very, *very* wee one?"

"We might; but there's the furnishing—chairs and tables, pots and kettles, and all the rest of it. I don't believe it would be any dearer to rent a small house than live in lodgings; for I have often been told that two people, especially husband and wife, cost no more than one."

"So have I," said Ada, "but I can't quite take it in. For, you see, we should both want our dinners, and I could not wear your coats any more than you could wear my dresses and mantles. Why, the piece of soap that we washed our hands with would go twice as fast when we *both* used it! But never mind that now; when are you going to take me to Hampstead Heath?"

And then it came out, somehow, that the respectable name of Cook had never been so much as mentioned at Chestnut House; that the Rev. Francis Carisbroke and the Misses Carisbroke and the lady so often referred to as "*Meliora*" were as yet blissfully ignorant of the existence of such a person as herself. So at last, Ada said curtly:—"I won't belong to one who is ashamed of me and perhaps of mine; our engagement is at an end, if you don't care for your sisters to know it." And then she burst into angry tears, with as much temper as sorrow in them; and Frank, who by this time was crazily enamoured of his little beauty, assured her he would go the very next evening to Chestnut House, and tell them all his happiness, and arrange for a very early meeting between his sisters and herself.

And the result was that visit and avowal already mentioned, and, after a good deal of talk, the arrangement for the ensuing Thursday evening.

CHAPTER XXV.

GENTLEMAN AND BUTTERMAN.

"The grand old name of gentleman."

"He is gentil that doth gentil deeds."

LUPIN VILLA was in a state of effervescence when it was announced that Ada was really to be presented to her father and sisters-in-law elect. If she had been going to be married on Thursday, the excitement and consequent bustle could scarcely have been exceeded. Of course, that question of questions—what should she wear?—was the primary consideration, and the whole house of Cook, Miss Lina included, sat in solemn debate for three mortal hours, in a vain attempt to come to a unanimous conclusion.

"If there was only time to go into Oxford Street and get something new and quite the fashion!" sighed Mrs. Cook. "How would it do to have a bad headache to-morrow morning, Ada, and write a polite note on perfumed paper, and put off the visit till next week?"

"It won't do," said Ada, shortly. "I am not going to set out with telling lies to Frank. I've always thought, ma, you would have got on a deal better with poor pa if you hadn't always been saying what wasn't true. He got at last not to believe a word you said."

"Don't be ungrateful, miss!" snapped ma, viciously. "If you don't take care, I'll let your precious Frank know all about young Tomkins and that other sweetheart of yours that called himself an M.D., when he was no more M.D. than I am. And there was the fellow that said he came from Marshall and Snelgrove's, and didn't. If you give me any more of your impertinence, it shall all come out."

"There, ma, don't be cross," interrupted Rosamond, the peacemaker. "Ada didn't mean anything, and it really is best not to get a habit of telling crams; you're sure to be found out, just when it's most inconvenient. I always

think Lucilla's affair would have gone on if there hadn't been that upset about going to Broadstairs. The truth never hurts anybody. But I wouldn't put off the visit because of a dress, if I were you, Ada."

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," cried Mariana, the fifth sister, and next in age to Ada, with the air of an oracle. "Your bird is in your hand to-day; if you let him flutter away, through your own folly, he may be in the bush next week, and refuse to answer to your call."

"Strike while the iron is hot!" sneered Anna Matilda; "there isn't much backbone in your young man's character, I should say, Ada. He doesn't always know his mind. I have found that out. Nail him *now*, while you have the chance, or I won't answer for your ever being Mrs. Carisbroke. But why make such a fuss about going to see your sweetheart's relations? Deary me, who are the Carisbrokes, I should like to know? Not as good as we are, when all comes to be told!"

"Oh, oh, Anna Matilda!" cried the two elder girls, as simultaneously as ever the Carisbroke twins had spoken. "Oh, oh!" rose in chorus from all the rest, save Ada, who was silent with indignation. And Mrs. Cook sharply bade the young lady mind her own business, and not talk about what she did not understand.

"It's well known," remarked Ada, with calm superiority, "that the Carisbrokes are a family of family. Give me good blood, and I'll forgive fallen fortunes."

"Good blood don't butter your parsnips, any more than fair words," retorted Anna Matilda, who really had more wit, and, on the whole, more common-sense, than any three of her sisters. If Ada was the beauty, Anna Matilda claimed to be the clever woman of the family. "Love can't live on pedigree, any more than on kisses and roses and moonlight! Give *me* a man that is well-to-do, and is sure to get on in life."

It was all arranged, at length; and then Anna Matilda observed, "Well; I'm glad it is settled; but if you mean to make such a to-do every time you go to visit those Carisbrokes, I hope you won't very often go! And such foolishness, too! A woman should never make much of her

husband's family; they should be made to play second fiddle to her own from the very first. I mean to marry *money*! But money shan't be uppish, and crow over me and mine, though it's more rights to hold its own than what is so ridiculously called 'family';—as if we didn't all—down to that costermonger in the street that's crying 'pennywinkles!' this very moment—come of a family of some sort! I suppose we are all descended from Adam, or at any rate from Mr. and Mrs. Noah? And as to these Carisbrokes, I say it, and I'll stick to it, that when all is said and done, they are not as good as we are!"

"Anna Matilda," interrupted Mrs. Cook, "don't talk rubbish. The Carisbrokes are well descended, and the Cooks are *not*. Your grandfather kept a little shop in Shoreditch. I was a Lomas—and the Lomases were once a sort of county-family, but I was foolish enough to marry for love! I am very glad to have one of my daughters marrying into her proper sphere—the Lomas sphere, that is!"

"Thank heaven, it is not my sphere, say I," retorted Anna Matilda. "I have always heard the Lomases were as poor as church-mice, and if there's anything I hate and despise, 'tis genteel poverty. What I mean about the Carisbrokes has nothing to do with their 'blood,' which would be exactly like the blood of the vulgar folks, if you bled them, I'll be bound. What I mean is this—the women of that family have to work for their daily bread, while we—the Cooks—haven't. I don't call schoolmistresses ladies—though you may. And if I were you, Ada, I would not knock under to any Carisbroke woman, let her hold her head ever so high!"

"Oh! I am not going to sing small to any of them, I can assure you," returned Ada, with the favourite toss of her curls; "but though I know how to hold my own, I know how to behave to my husband's family, I hope, and you may talk till your tongue is tired, Anna Matilda, but nothing will ever convince me that a clergyman's son is not a great deal better and of far more consequence in society than a *butterman's*!"

"There are buttermen *and* buttermen."

"That is understood, and there's a good deal of money

to be got out of butter and cheese and bacon, I dare say But there—*how is it got?* ”

“Honestly,” cried Anna Matilda, getting very red in the face; “perhaps a little more honestly than if it was got by distraining Dissenters for tithes, after the fashion of some clergymen, that I wouldn’t demean myself by speaking to.”

“I didn’t mean to insinuate that buttermen don’t get their money honestly, any more than grocers and butchers, so you need not be so sharp, Anna Matilda. But I suppose you will confess that, much or little, it is got by *trade?* ”

“Well! And trade, so long as it isn’t cheating, is respectable, isn’t it?”

“Ah! *respectable!* well, yes; it may be that, no doubt. But I want something more than respectability.”

“And you are a goose for your pains, Ada. If you don’t get something *less*, I am very much mistaken. It would be well for you if your Mr. Carisbroke was a prosperous tradesman. As it is, what is he? Just a clerk in a merchant’s office, who’ll never get more than three hundred a-year till the end of his days. You’ll have what’s called a ‘limited income,’ and limited it will be, to the end. I mean to marry a man whose income is not limited, I can assure you.”

“Isn’t it a case of sour grapes, dear? I know who would have said ‘snap’ to Frank’s ‘snip’ a month ago, if she had had the chance.”

“I don’t pretend to misunderstand you, Ada; I don’t deny that I might have been fool enough to have accepted young Carisbroke a month ago, if I had had, as you say, the chance. Thank heaven, I hadn’t! I know him too well, now. Why! he’s as weak as water; he is shilly-shally by nature, and I should say he is not to be depended on. There’s nothing morally against him, perhaps; but I wouldn’t give much for his principles, if they were tried. He’s the sort of man that likes to please himself, and what pleases him one year won’t please him another; and that’s a very bad sort for husbands to be made of, let me tell you. No! You’re welcome to him, my dear Ada. It might have been ‘sour grapes’ *once*. It isn’t now, for I am going to do much better for myself. If your grapes are not sour,

they are very poor and watery; mine are rich and sweet and ripe, ready for the plucking. Mrs. Patterson will never wish she stood in Mrs. Carisbroke's shoes."

"Mrs. Patterson! Then you *are* going to marry the butterman, Anna Matilda?"

"I am going to marry the butterman; though he deals in bacon and cheese and poultry and game, as well as butter. And a very good paying business he has. This one in Hampstead Road is only a branch; the chief shop is in the Borough."

"Yes, I know that; it says so on the *carts* that go about for orders."

"And get them, too. The business in the Borough is the old gentleman's, and so was this one, till he gave it up to his son. But it will all come to Richard before long, for his father wants to retire and finish his days in the country; and he says to Richard, 'All I ask of you is to stick to business as I've done, and get a nice wife as soon as ever you can find her, for I want to see you a thriving man, with your children about you, before I die!' And Richard, being a dutiful son, has looked for a wife, and found her, and she doesn't mean to be ashamed of the shop."

"Does ma know?"

"No, she does not; but you're welcome to go and tell her this moment, if you like. Richard will be here this very evening to be introduced to *my* family, and I am going to spend next Sunday with the old people in the Borough."

"Over the shop?"

"Yes! over the shop. The shop won't hurt me, I dare say, for there will not be any Sunday trading. And Mrs. Howell, Richard's only sister, will be there, too, and her husband; so that we may all know each other, and be comfortable at once. It's a nice sort of family—one son and one daughter, and the daughter a well-to-do married woman, in the ironmongery."

"Well! I only hope Frank and your butterman will not often meet. It can't be pleasant to a gentleman to be associated with tradespeople; and I only hope he may not think he has reasonable cause to break off the engagement, for he never bargained to be brother-in-law to a shopkeeper."

"Uncle Ben is a tradesman, if you come to that, and so is the greatest merchant that ever sailed ships on the sea."

"Uncle Ben is a manufacturer, which is a very different thing. Of course, I don't mind trade, for pa was in trade, but I do detest shopkeepers; they are such a low set. Now I'll go and look at my dress. I think I might get it cut square by to-morrow night."

That night—that evening rather—the buttermilk man, or to speak more politely, Mr. Richard Patterson, according to promise, put in an appearance at Lupin Villa. Mrs. Cook was not quite so much surprised as she pretended to be. She could not quite approve of the match, she mildly declared; but dear Anna Matilda was twenty-one, and she must please herself. After all, every girl could not marry into a high family, and she was sure Mr. Patterson would make an excellent husband, though he was connected with retail trade.

Now, I cannot say that Richard Patterson was a particularly gentlemanly person, for he had not been brought up in a circle that pretends to much refinement, but he was *sound at heart*. He would not condescend to any meanness; he abhorred shams and pretensions, he despised hypocrisy. Perhaps the chief reason why his business flourished so well was that people *knew* that they would get their moneysworth at his shop; they were sure of a genuine article if it passed over his counter. Then he was really kind, was always ready to lend a helping hand to one who needed it; gave himself no foppish airs, and gloried in being an honest, straightforward, bustling British shopkeeper. I am quite sure that Richard Patterson would have proved to be the more "genuine article" of the two, compared with Frank Carisbroke, if only you took the grand old term, "gentleman," in its truest and fullest sense.

He won Mrs. Cook's heart, too, by not coming to woo empty-handed. He arrived by omnibus from Hampstead Road, and brought with him a hamper, containing a fine plump pair of fowls, some celebrated sausages—"Patterson's Own"—a little basket of new-laid eggs, and half-a-dozen pounds of "best fresh," that really deserved its

title. Mrs. Cook and Rosamond in private conclave agreed that such a suitor was by no means to be despised, as money was not too plentiful in their midst; and, after all, fowls and butter were much more to the purpose than flowers and new music, and now and then an order for the theatre! It would be quite as well, though, that the two young men should not meet too often. Mr. Frank would certainly feel himself "demeaned" by being brought into close company with a butterman; while the butterman, on his part, though so kindly-natured and genial, would certainly resent any kind of impertinence from Mr. Frank.

So it was settled, after Mr. Patterson's departure, that he should have the *entrée* of Lupin Villa on Monday and Thursday nights, and Frank on Tuesdays and Fridays; each young man taking his Sunday in turn.

"It doesn't much matter," said Anna Matilda complacently, "for he won't come courting for long. 'Happy the wooing that is not long a-doing' is *his* maxim, he says. He told me, not an hour ago, standing under this very chandelier, that there was no need to wait—the house in Hampstead Road is in good repair, and only wants a little paint and paper, and some good handsome furniture put into it, and the sooner we are settled down the better, and the more pleased the old folks will be. He actually wanted me to name the day, but I thought that was going a little too fast, and I said I would consider and let him know on Sunday. But I suppose it will be early in the autumn, not later than August, perhaps. I told you I should be the first to marry, for all Ada's pretty face and nightingale voice; but I've always said she has the beauty and I've the brains."

And then Anna Matilda displayed her new engagement ring, a very handsome one, with one good-sized emerald in the middle, and little clusters of diamonds on each side. Oh! how they sparkled and gave out prismatic rays as their delighted owner flashed them about under the gas-lights!

Ada was fairly disgusted; she could have cried with mortification and envy. It was monstrous that a butterman should present diamonds and a *real* emerald to his

betrothed, while a gentleman born and bred like her Frank could only afford a few not over-valuable turquoises! But she consoled herself with observing that emeralds were *unlucky*.

Now, Mrs. Cook did not like her darling to be vexed, nor did she care to anger her other daughter, of whose sharp tongue she was afraid. It was provoking, certainly. It was a great pity that Beauty should not have had the diamonds, as the turquoises would do very well for Wit; but it could not be helped, and the only thing to be done was to keep the peace and make the best of it. It was something, Mrs. Cook felt, to have two of her six daughters engaged to be married; she had begun to be quite anxious, for Rosamond, at twenty-four, had never had a lover; Lucilla talked of going into a sisterhood; Anna Matilda, up till now, had frightened away all would-be suitors; Ada had flirted furiously, but no betrothal ring had ever before graced her slender finger; Marian had only just left school, and she was unfortunately plain; Emmeline, of course, was not eligible as yet. So, on the whole, Mrs. Cook was thankful, and determined not to quarrel with the gifts with which Providence favoured her in the shape of sons-in-law.

"Come, come, girls!" she said, good-humouredly; "don't let us have any cross words. One has got one thing and another another, and nobody need expect to have everything. And I hope you'll both be happy."

With which maternal admonition, Mrs. Cook lowered the gas, told the young ladies it was quite time they went to get their "beauty-sleep," and retired herself into the kitchen to count the spoons, and to see that "the girl" had left the fire safe, and fastened up the doors.

On the whole, there are worse mothers than Mrs. Cook. And yet, curiously enough, Richard Patterson, as he walked back to Hampstead Road that night, taking a stretch as he went, on his own side of Regent's Park, and thinking about his wedding-day, came to precisely the same resolution as had Frank Carisbroke a month before. He said to himself, as he turned in at Gloucester Gate—"I love the girl, but I don't somehow take to her belongings; I sha'n't encourage too much intimacy once she's

Mrs. Richard, and the sooner that comes to pass the better. She's the best of the bunch by a long chalk; Miss Ada is a lot prettier, of course, but that pink-and-white-doll beauty was never to my taste, and she's such a silly, vain little puss. I don't envy her lover—young Carisbroke, that's such a swell! Carisbroke!—Carisbroke!—where did I hear that name before? Seems to me we've had something to do with Carisbrokes some time or other. Put 'em in the county-court, perhaps—like as not! And as soon as ever the day is fixed, I shall begin to call my girl 'Annie.' Anna-Matilda! Whatever were her god-fathers and godmothers thinking about when they gave her such a ridiculous name! I won't spend my time in calling my wife names! She may be Anna-Matilda to her own people, if she likes, but she must be plain Annie to me. Nothing could be prettier or sweeter than 'Annie!' Nothing could be more like the heroine of a trashy novel than 'Anna-Matilda!'

Next evening, quite early, Frank arrived to escort Ada to Hampstead Heath. He was nervously anxious that she should meet with the approbation of his sisters; above all, he hoped that *Joan* would take to her—for Joan had become an influence in the family, and many persons not of her family were apt to quote her opinion. Frank's tastes had often been revolted by the gaiety of Ada's attire; he wished devoutly she had some idea of the harmony of colours, and was not so fond of startling blues and reds. Charming as she was, he thought she looked just the least bit vulgar when arrayed in all her Sunday best. The green flounced robe in which she was attired on the present occasion he had never seen, and great was his consternation when she met him in that Cupid's bower, the front drawing-room, and bewitchingly asked him, "How do I look, Frankie dear?"

She was evidently quite satisfied with her appearance, and Frank was at a loss how to inform her in the least unpleasant way that she had made a fright of herself! She had on a bright emerald-green dress; three-flounced, as was then the fashion, and—*cut square*! Her ribbons—and they fluttered all about her—were pink; her lace was plentiful and cheap; her really beautiful hair was half

concealed by a hideous thing, yclept "head-dress," all velvet and flowers, and imitation pearls and gilt dangles! The unfortunate young man was fairly aghast at the thought of presenting this May-day Queen to his simply but well-dressed sisters, and to Meliora, who would be quite sure to take poor Ada's social and mental measure at a glance.

"Don't I do? Ain't I right?" asked Ada, a little defiantly, marking the disapprobation on her lover's face.

"Well, dear, don't you think you are a little over-dressed for the occasion? Something darker and plainer would suit you so much better; and if you would not hide your lovely curls, I should admire you more. You are always beautiful to me, darling; but then I want others to be struck with your looks at *first sight*, as I was, you know, that wet, wild evening at St. Ursula's."

"So you think I am over-dressed?" and Ada pouted like a fractious child. "Do you want me to look a *dowdy*?"

"You could never look that, dear! But it is not considered good taste to go to an informal family gathering, *as* one of the family, dressed for an evening party, you understand. I like you best in something dark; your black silk fits you admirably."

"My black silk—a poor, flimsy thing at the best—is all frayed, and greased, and dropping into rags. Besides, black silk is for old ladies; that is, when it is really good, and stands of its own richness; the commoner sort suits young women in shops for their Sunday best. You wouldn't wish me to look like a shopwoman!"

"I hope she won't say such things to Joan and Meliora," was Frank's private comment. "Maggie will say she is snobbish, and even Brenda will disapprove. Oh, dear, I wish she did not look so much like somebody out on a holiday—say Whit-Monday, going to Rosherville or the Crystal Palace."

In vain Frank reasoned and pleaded: he had now to discover that his fair *inamorata* could, if need were, make up her mind, and *abide by it*! She refused to make any alteration in her toilet, beyond curtailing a bow, or an end of ribbon here and there; she absolutely declined to

change her rustling green dress for any other ; and, above all, she rejected with indignation and disdain the idea of mulcting herself of the pearls and dangles and rose-buds that crowned her silken locks. "I'll go as I am or not at all," said she firmly ; and Frank felt himself beaten, and surrendered unconditionally. There was nothing for him but to accept the inevitable, and make the best he could of his situation. But when he put his splendid lady-love into the cab, which they found in the next street, he thought in his utmost heart he had never seen her looking less lovely or so common-place ! She had not—no ! she *had not*—the exact manner and bearing of a lady, still less of a gentlewoman, that grandest of feminine English titles !

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MOONLIGHT PROMENADE.

"Friendship is constant in all other things,
Save in the office and affairs of love."

It was later by half-an-hour than the time appointed when the lovers drove up the avenue to Chestnut House. Ada was considerably impressed ; she had not anticipated so grand a place, her ideas of school-keeping being on the most limited scale, and gleaned chiefly from the fifth-rate "Seminaries" and "Ladies' Colleges" at which she and her elder sisters had graduated. "What a fine old house, and what trees !" she exclaimed, as the cabman pulled up before the heavy grey portico ; "but everything looks awfully solemn !"

"There is Maggie,—that is Miss Carisbroke," said Frank, as he saw a small, elegant figure advancing from the hall. "Where is Joan, I wonder !" Then he assisted Ada to alight, and while he settled with the cab-

man Maggie introduced herself, and led her guest into the house.

Maggie had wonderfully improved of late years; adversity had proved to her a teacher not too stern, yet decidedly efficient. Large-souled and noble-hearted she would never be; there would always be about her a certain smallness of mind, as characteristic as her smallness of stature. But she had learned many things since she and Lavinia were left to head the ill-kept and impecunious household; she had learned to think less about herself, and more of those around her; she had learned that duty may not be cast aside at the selfish instance of disinclination, and that honest labour is to be preferred to ignoble indolence. Above all, she had learned to love and trust *Meliora*, and to appreciate Joan. She was still, of course, a plain, unattractive young woman, so far as mere looks went; she had still the same swarthy complexion, irregular features, and limp dark hair as of old, but the vixenish expression of countenance had almost disappeared, or was seen only at rare intervals. She had developed, too, in style and manner, and bore herself with an unassuming quiet dignity that accorded well with her *petite* and elegant person, and with her position as Miss Carisbroke of Chestnut House. "Not at all pretty, almost ugly—but distinguished—yes, decidedly distinguished," was Ada's unpronounced opinion, as she followed Maggie into the drawing-room, where Joan sat at the pianoforte, performing, as only a true musician could, one of Beethoven's least familiar sonatas. Ruby sat upon the white fleecy hearthrug, playing with her Chinchilla kitten—as pretty a picture as an artist could desire to see.

When Joan rose to greet the new-comer she almost shrank back into herself; she was so astonished at the tall, stately maiden, who accosted her with the utmost kindness, but with the unconscious air of a princess. Neither Joan nor Maggie intended it, but there was an involuntary condescension in their manner, and something of reserve in their most cordial tones, which Ada was not slow to perceive. Frank had said that all his sisters, except the little one, were plain; but Ada felt she would

willingly exchange some of her skin-deep beauty for Maggie's *piquante* and aristocratic style. As for Joan, she thought she had never seen any one so handsome or of such regal bearing, and they both moved and spoke, and swept about—or so poor Ada imagined—like creatures of a superior order! Were these the despised schoolmistresses she had meant to startle and overawe by a display of her finery and underbred airs and graces? Only—she felt that she could never be at her ease with these young ladies, with whom she instinctively knew that she had but little in common.

In vain she tried to rally, assuring herself she was “quite as good as they,” and was not to be frightened by mere fine-ladyism. Frank was terribly disappointed, vexed at her evident *mauvaise honte*, yet fearful of the moment when restraint should be cast aside. He waited with impatience, however, for the moment when he could show her off as a vocalist. Of his sisters, Joan only had any voice, and hers was a contralto of no very fine quality, but perfectly cultivated; she and Ada could sing together very nicely, he thought.

Brenda, as usual, was quiet and dreamy, and looked at Ada with some curiosity. Ada decided that she was dull and heavy, on the whole uninteresting, nevertheless—a lady. But in presence of Meliora she was altogether discomfited; Miss Martin was a person whom she could never in the least understand, yet who comprehended her only too well. She saw at once what Ada was—vain of her extreme prettiness, ignorant of the world outside her own little clique, vulgar by reason of extreme pretension, and as little fitted to be the wife of a poor struggling working man as to grace the precincts of a royal court. She would never help Frank, she would be, in time to come, a burden to him; as the inevitable cares of married life pressed upon her, she would sink into a dowdy and a slattern, and become a weariness to herself and a drag upon her husband.

Mr. Carisbroke received her very kindly, and called her “my dear,” but this was not one of his good days; he suffered now from depressing nervous headaches, and he could only talk with his future daughter-in-law for a very

little while. "A pretty little creature, a very pretty little creature, only so absurdly dressed," was his verdict afterwards; "and not a bad disposition, I should say," he added, "but by no means the wife for Frank; not the girl for him!"

What a long dull evening it was! It was in vain that Joan and Meliora tried to make conversation—there was absolutely nothing to talk about except music, and even that subject was difficult to maintain, the Carisbroke ladies and Ada having very few favourite pieces in common. Frank was glad to get Joan to the piano—he knew Ada was not to be trusted to play her own accompaniments, and he kept his sister well employed, while he and his betrothed sang duet after duet, till Meliora and Maggie began to wish for some variation in the entertainment. Never had Frank been so fidgety and hard to please, and, as was natural to his disposition, he always became querulous when put out.

Quite late in the evening he left Ada for a few minutes alone with Brenda. Meliora had gone to the schoolroom, and Joan was in the kitchen. Frank waited in the hall till he heard her step in the long flagged passage leading from the offices; then he went to meet her, saying, "Put a shawl over your head, old girl, and come out with me into the moonlight; I want a word with you."

"Shall we not invite Miss Cook to join us?" replied Joan, thinking that she could easily give the lovers the slip, and spend a little time in correcting the exercises of the evening.

"No; I want you just now. Brenda is entertaining Ada with your scrap-book. How do you like her?"

"I hardly know, I have seen so little of her; she is not very talkative."

"Oh, she can talk fast enough among her own people! But don't be tiresome, Joan; I know you have already sat in judgment on her, and recorded your verdict. You are famous for knowing all about people, and understanding them at a first interview. Didn't you read that obnoxious housemaid from the moment you set eyes upon her, and regret that Maggie had engaged her? and wasn't your reading as true as if you had been gifted with second

sight or actual clairvoyance? and that cunning but smooth-tongued landlady at the seaside—you saw through her, right to the back of her head and down to the bottom of her dirty little soul, while we only saw her smiling, smirking, plausible countenance !”

“She was seen through easily enough. Her soul was so very small, and her head so very much like a bullet ! Besides, I never trust people who have eyes like black beads, and that indescribable expression about the mouth.”

“You were quite one too many for her.”

“Happily, *yes* ! I am afraid, however, she did me a moral injury notwithstanding, for I had the greatest difficulty in regarding her with common Christian charity. I knew I should have to frighten her in some way every time we met ; there is nothing to be done with persons of a certain calibre, but to make them wholesomely afraid of you ! I should have been qualified for a professed vixen and bully if I had had much more to do with her.”

“Never mind that detestable woman. I believe, Joan, you are talking about her, who you will probably never see again, because you *won't* talk about my pretty darling.”

“She is very pretty—if that is what you wish me to say—extremely pretty, *sweetly* pretty !—prettier than anything I have ever seen out of a picture.”

“I think her beautiful.”

“I prefer my own adjective. She is on too small a scale for *beauty*. Don't look glum, Frank. Be content to have the prettiest little wife in all the British Isles. Beauty—real, downright, actual beauty—would not mate with you, Frank, I am afraid. Beauty would want a carriage, and horses, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and unlimited credit at her dressmaker's, and diamonds, and the means of faring sumptuously every day ; and you could not give her a twentieth part of her requirements. Besides, what could *you* do with—

“‘A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
And most divinely fair’ ?

‘Airy, fairy, Lilian’ will suit you infinitely better than Helen of Troy or Iphigenia.”

“You concede that Ada is *very* pretty ?”

"Extremely, undeniably pretty—almost lovely. I have said it."

"And what else?"

"Do you want the truth—or compliments, brother Frank?"

"The truth, of course, though I dare say it won't be flattering. *Your* compliments, Joan, are too often sarcasms."

"Compliments are not in my way, though I am capable; I assure you, of an intense and enthusiastic admiration. Well, then, to tell the truth, I do not think she is over-wise, or——"

"Go on—don't hesitate—don't spare my feelings."

"Or—over-amiable, I was about to add. She has been made too much of at home, I should say. Her vanity has been fostered, and she has been taught to appraise her charms extravagantly. Many of her faults are doubtless owing to injudicious training. Her education, too, has been of the shallowest kind, and it strikes me she is not accustomed to really good society."

"Well, there *is* truth in what you say. She has *not* been nicely trained; no Meliora has ever sojourned at Lupin Villa. As to her education, why, she hasn't been educated at all! She can make wax-flowers, and do fancy work, but she hates plain sewing, and vows she never will marry to mend stockings. She draws a little and paints a little, or she did before she left school. Finally, they taught her to dance gracefully, to sing passably, to play easy tunes tolerably, and to take great care of her hands and of her complexion. There! don't say I have not been candid."

"I confess that you have spoken freely, and I thank you for your confidence. It is not cheering, what you have told me; but a great deal may be remedied if the girl herself has the sense to see her own defects, and the desire to be, rather than seem, a person of education and culture. How old is she?"

"Nineteen last birthday. She will be twenty some time this summer."

"As nearly as possible my own age."

"Ah yes! But then you have had advantages all your life."

"I fancy I have had a good many disadvantages, too. My education never commenced till Meliora took me in hand. What do you want Miss Cook to do?"

"Call her Ada! it sounds more friendly, more sisterly."

"I will try, though I warn you people in her condition of life are very fond of their formal appellatives. The lower you go in life, the more relations '*Miss*' and '*Mrs.*' each other! I have known sisters who sedulously eschewed each other's Christian names. I will say '*Ada*,' if you like, leaving you to explain that I am not taking liberties."

"All right. She is not so foolish as that comes to. She hoped my sisters would not be stiff and formal. Now, Joan dear, do take her up, and be a real, good, kind sister to her. If *you* take her up all the rest will—Meliora included."

"You are quite sure of your own mind, Frank? You mean to marry her?"

"As soon as ever I can. Sure of my own mind? I couldn't be surer. She is the dearest little love in the world, and I shall never see another girl I like a quarter as well. I only wish I could marry her offhand, and take her away from her own people, for I must confess they are less and less to my taste. You see, they treat me now as one of themselves, which I cannot find fault with, of course; but the consequence is, that I see a good deal that I never saw before. The varnish is off the picture, and it does not look quite the same."

"That is sure to be the case with persons who rejoice in two sets of manners. It is a mistake, Frank, when a man marries out of his own order. But they are by no means a needy family, I think you said?"

"I really don't know what their circumstances are. They live comfortably, though not expensively. The mother has an income, certainly, and makes it a point of honour to keep all her daughters at home '*as ladies*'—that is, doing nothing for their own maintenance. And Ada tells me that each one has, under her father's will, £100 on her marriage. That would furnish our house, would it not?"

"A house could be furnished for £100 certainly, but it must be a small one, and you must go about it most

economically. It is a great pity for so many girls to be living in idleness."

"I do not think they are absolutely idle. They keep only one young servant, who seems to be afflicted with perpetual swelled-face, which she tries to cure with the blacking-brush. And I fancy they do most of their own dressmaking and millinery. Then there is their music—they are all more or less musical; and Rosamond, the eldest, is grand at pastry and preserves. Mariana studies a great deal—she is only sixteen—and is reported to write for *Minnikin's Magazine*, a periodical, by the bye, which never pays its contributors."

"All this is better than doing literally nothing, of course, but it is a grand mistake to waste one's life on unprofitable labour; it is the next worst thing to being actually idle. Why don't mothers bring up their girls to have a definite aim in life?"

"They do, most of them, and their aim is to get married, and for that purpose to make themselves as ornamental as possible."

"A most unworthy aim, and in many cases a delusive one. All women cannot marry, because the feminine sex largely preponderates. We are trying to teach our pupils a very different lesson."

"Bringing them to abjure matrimony, eh? Teaching them that 'men were deceivers ever'?"

"Nothing of the kind; we teach, or strive to teach them, that God has some work for them all, married and single—that it is a great honour to be the Christian mistress of a Christian household; but that any position in which a woman is placed by God is also honourable. Who can be happier or more nobly employed than *Meliora*?"

"I wonder if you will ever marry, Joan!"

"I may, but I rather think not. I have never yet seen a man, either married or single, whom I would like to have for my own husband."

"You are tremendously fastidious; but all in good time, yet—only you always seem to me a great deal older than you really are—thirty, at least! I should like to know your ideal of a husband."

"I have no such ideal; at least, I think not. I am quite

content as I am ; besides, I have little Ruby to bring up. *She* is my special work in the world ! God gave her to me to be my child. If ever I am married, it will be to some one whom I can not only love, but reverence and honour ; indeed, I cannot in the least comprehend a love that is not built upon the deepest, truest reverence and the highest honour ; some one with a grander soul than my own, and with a profounder intellect—one who will be to me closest and dearest companion, soul-friend and lover, and yet my *master*, at whose feet I can sit and learn ! ”

“ I wish you joy of your ideal ! By the powers, sister Joan, but you are a very extraordinary young woman. Don’t go about the world telling folk that you want a master, or they will think you are demented. I am not sure but that some of the shrieking sisterhood who want ‘ their rights ’ will tear you into pieces. I shall come up to Hampstead some day, and find a lock of black hair and a thumb-nail—all that remains of my unfortunate, but imprudent, sister Joan.”

“ If I married a man who was *not* my master, we should fight for the supremacy, and he would be my slave ! I am afraid I am rather unwomanly, Frank. I feel that I must either command or obey ; it is ‘ my nature to,’ as that unlucky hymn is so often made to say, and I can’t help myself. Don’t let us talk about matrimony any more, especially with reference to myself. Besides, we must go back to the house. We are behaving quite rudely to Ada, you especially.”

“ One moment, Joan. I want you to do something. Will you ? ”

“ I cannot tell ; I must know what the thing is. I never promise blindly.”

“ You would not be Joan if you did. You are the most unnaturally prudent and cautious creature in the world. I should like to find you hasty and impulsive, for once.”

“ I can be impulsive enough upon occasion. What is the promise you wish me to give ? ”

“ Just this. I want you to have Ada *here*. I want you to mould my wife.”

“ Wives must be ready made, not moulded to order. And what do you mean by having her here ? ”

"I wish you to ask her to come to you on a long, friendly, informal visit, which can be extended from time to time, till our wedding-day is fixed, in fact. And I shall tell her that I should like her to prosecute some of those studies which have been neglected in her education; and she would learn so much from intercourse with you and Meliora. She would catch the air and style she ought to have; her mind would be insensibly improved, and she would be weaned from her own family, from whom I should like to separate her entirely. What do you say?"

"That I am pretty sure no man has any right to marry a girl, and then build up insurmountable barriers between her and her own kith and kin. God has established the tie of family, and it is sacred, next to the marriage bond, with which, indeed, it is closely connected. If you marry Ada, you must, in a sense, marry her relations."

"But I won't; that's flat! She may see them sometimes, of course—I suppose I could not help her doing so; but as for being hand-in-glove with them, having them come in and out at their own sweet will, it is not to be thought of. Mrs. Cook is not exactly a bad sort, but she—well, she doesn't stick to facts, and she has a genius for diplomacy, which is not to be desired in one's mother-in-law. I wish Ada were an only child and an orphan. But all these questions will keep. What do you say to my proposal? Be quick, for we really ought to be going in."

"I think you are diplomatic. It will be a case of 'diamond cut diamond' between you and Mrs. Cook. I can say nothing to your proposal, which seems to be that we should take a parlour-boarder, and finish her education, to the best of our ability, *without pay*! You forget that I am not sole mistress here."

"If you set your heart upon it, Meliora will consent. Maggie, I know, will not object, and, I suppose, you would not consult Brenda? Come, Joan, you will relieve me of a load of anxiety if you will entertain the project."

"I am afraid I cannot. It will not work, in any way; and I do not think we are justified in adding to our expenses, which are necessarily very heavy. Our school prospers, but it takes a great deal of money to carry it on,

and the capital is really Meliora's. There is another objection."

"Well!"

"You would wish to come here continually, to see Ada?"

"Of course. A brother is an admissible visitor, surely."

"You are not Ada's brother. The girls would soon find out the relations between you, and it would furnish food for gossip and undesirable chatter. We hurried Lavinia's marriage, because we felt the incongruity of school-keeping and love-making. No, Frank, we cannot have court-ing *here!*"

"You are a regular Lady-Abbess, Joan! It is unnatural in a young girl of twenty talking in such a strain. I wonder you allow me here at all."

"It would not be expedient for you to come too often, in any case. The male element in a ladies' school is best represented by grave, elderly professors. Frank, please say no more; indeed, I will listen to no more. I will talk the matter over with Meliora and Maggie, and let you know to what conclusion we come. There is the supper-bell."

Reluctantly enough, Frank turned to the house, and found Ada rather sulky, and disposed to resent his inattention. She had spent a very dull evening, though Meliora had done her best to draw her out, praised her voice, and shown her a new stitch in embroidery. Ada was one of those unfortunate people who are always dwelling on their own *claims*, and looking out for slights, and thereby causing much real unhappiness to themselves, as well as annoyance to others. Moreover, she had not shone as she meant to shine. She had not been able to manifest her own superiority as a lady by profession, so to speak, over those who were compelled to work for their maintenance. She had found it absolutely impossible to show off before "these school-mistresses."

"Well, darling," said Frank, with a yawn, when they were fairly in the cab which was to take them back to Camden Town, "I hope you like my sisters?"

"I don't see much to like in them," replied Ada, crossly. "I am tired to death. We didn't have a single game at cards, and there was really nothing to talk about. And that woman you call Meliora was pumping me, I know, to

find out how ignorant I am. Thank heaven, *I* am not obliged to make stock-in-trade of every bit of knowledge. I wouldn't be a governess for any money; they are always looked down upon."

"There are governesses *and* governesses, and they are not always contemned. Many people very much admire and esteem Meliora, and my sisters also, especially Joan."

"Joan don't like me. She took stock of me at tea-time, and I saw by her eyes she thought you might have chosen better."

"She spoke very kindly of you. She said she had never seen any one prettier; and that's a great deal for Joan to admit."

"I can't see why you make such a goddess of Joan. She is handsome enough, but horrid proud, I am sure. I tell you what it is, Frank—she and I will never get on together. And I did not take to Maggie, though she is really very stylish. Brenda is silly, evidently."

And so the young lady ran on, till, to Frank's infinite relief, the cab stopped before the little garden-gate of Lupin Villa. The visit to Chestnut House had certainly not been a success.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SELF-RELIANCE.

"O living will, that shalt endure
When all that seems shall suffer shock,
Rise, in the spiritual rock,
Flow through our deeds, and make them pure."

"I wish I knew what I *ought* to do!" sighed Joan, as she sat alone in her room that night, with only Ruby asleep in her cot, after the visit of the betrothed pair. She had said a word or two to Meliora, who had quietly replied,

"My dear, you are mistress, not I. You and Maggie must decide between you."

"And I leave it entirely to Joan," responded Maggie, quickly. "You see, I really have no right to legislate here, as I shall be gone in a few months at the latest. Do as you like, Joan, only I strongly advise you to have nothing to do with Frank's foolish, ill-bred little doll! What do you say, Brenda?"

"I say I don't like her at all, and I am sure she will not make Frank a good wife. Besides, Joan, you told him flatly it could not be, did you not?"

"I did, Brenda; but I dare say he will return to the subject speedily, for I could see that he had the project very much at heart, and you know Frank can be persistent enough when he has an end to gain. The thing is—what *ought* we to do?"

"I cannot see that there is any question about it," replied Maggie; "but if there be, it is for you and Meliora to settle."

"Meliora declines to give her opinion. If she would say 'yes' or 'no,' it would be enough. We would—at least, I would—simply abide by her decision. Why won't you tell us what to do, Meliora?"

"Because, my dear, it is quite time you told yourself what to do. You must learn to depend upon your own judgment. I have taken the lead too long. It was all very well as long as you were a child, and, in some sort, a pupil of mine; but the habit of obedience, however exemplary in youth, may be carried to an injurious extent in maturer years. The girl's docility may degenerate into the woman's supineness. You *must* learn, Joan, to judge for yourself."

"If you say so, Meliora, I must. But I feel so puzzled just now, as to the rights and wrongs of the affair. Ought we not to help our brother? I am afraid I answered him somewhat ungraciously when I told him that he wanted to saddle us with a boarder without payment. But I will think it over, and if I am to decide, I will do it before the morning. I shall be fit for nothing till the matter is arranged."

And then they all went upstairs, and Joan remained a

long time awake, carefully going over the pros and cons as regarded Frank's presumptuous proposition, and trying to find out what really was her *duty*. After an earnest prayer for guidance she at last fell asleep, and dreamed that she was herself going to be married to some one whom she had never seen or heard of, and Ada, as first bridesmaid, wore an apple-green silk skirt, and a yellow satin bodice, and affirmed that the bridegroom was her own cousin just come home from Australia! And then the clergyman who was performing the ceremony suddenly turned into Frederic Mander, and denounced Ada as a heartless, designing coquette, of whom both Frank and his sisters had better be aware. Then followed a ridiculous jumble of the transformation scenes with which most of us are familiar in our dreams, and which Joan forgot altogether as soon as she awoke; but the words that were still ringing in her ears, when she sprang up, to find the room all bright with early morning sunshine, followed her while she dressed, and while she arranged, according to custom, some class-lessons for the day. And the words were—"Don't help foolish Frank to befool himself past remedy!"

Her resolution was taken; and when she heard Brenda astir in the next room, she went to her, and said, "I have made up my mind, Brenda; but I am afraid you will think I am very silly, for it was a *dream*, I believe, that determined me not to have Ada Cook here on any protracted visit."

"I don't care what determined you, so that Miss Cook does not bother us! And I am quite sure it cannot be *our* duty to mould a wife for Frank."

"Certainly not. I think my conscience had got into a morbid state last night, chiefly, I suppose, because I was conscious of having spoken to Frank very bluntly, and I am afraid somewhat hastily. It would be, I am convinced, a most ungrateful task to attempt to mould a wife for any one. Besides, it strikes me very forcibly that Ada Cook would indignantly resent the idea of any moulding process being necessary, or at all expedient. We should have 'a handful of her,' as Mrs. Brown said we should have of her two spoilt, saucy, untrained daughters."

"Another thing. Perhaps Ada is like David Copperfield's pretty little Dora, and has already moulded herself in her own way, past any interference of ours, or of Frank's!"

"It is very probable. I am afraid we should fail to influence Miss Cook as her lover hopes we should, while I feel perfectly convinced that her presence in this house would not be for the good of the children confided to our care. And I have no doubt that they ought to be in every way our first consideration. We should fail in our duty to them if we admitted among them an influence of which we are ourselves in doubt."

"We might do that by undertaking an undesirable companion for them in the shape of a new pupil, might we not?"

"Indeed we might. But the case would be far different. An ill-regulated pupil comes to us in the natural course of business, so to speak, and we have full control over her, with the final remedy of dismissing her if she fail to give evidence of timely reformation. We could have no real authority over Miss Cook, and she would have many opportunities of exerting a pernicious influence among the girls; nor could we rid ourselves of her, if she chose to stay on, without giving great cause of offence to her family, and, of course, to Frank. Let us keep clear of the apple of discord."

"With all my heart."

"And now I will go and tell Meliora."

"I wonder why she would not speak out last night?"

"I believe I know why. She thinks I am getting to have no bones in my character, and that I have got into a bad habit of leaning upon her in every emergency; it is not that she wishes herself to shirk the responsibility, but she feels that I ought at my age to be able, if requisite, to form an independent judgment, to come, unaided by her, to a decision, and *abide by it!* And she is right; I have insensibly learned to lean upon her, till I am almost incapable of arriving at a decision without her counsel and help."

But before Joan went to Meliora, she helped Ruby to dress, and heard her say her little prayers and her morning

hymn. And by that time Meliora was at her post in the schoolroom, hearing the girls say their daily texts—the only lesson allowed at Chestnut House before breakfast. Meliora very sensibly objected to a course of studies prior to the morning meal.

They had only a few minutes to themselves before the ringing of the school-bell, and then Joan said: "I have decided, and I hope rightly! I do not think it would be for any one's advantage to carry out Frank's extraordinary schemes. He would be disappointed in the end, and I am quite sure our best endeavours would be foiled. If Frank wants his affianced bride to be *moulded*—the phrase is Trollope's, I believe!—he must mould her himself."

"You have quite settled this in your own mind?"

"Quite. I see that to please Frank would be to displease others, who would be vexed and possibly injured, without the probability of any commensurate benefit to Frank, or to the girl herself."

"Then now I may speak freely. You have argued exactly as I did myself, and have arrived at the same conclusion. It seems to me that you are acting wisely and rightly, without behaving in unsisterly fashion to poor Frank. He has done a very foolish thing, and it is not for you to interfere in one way or the other; opposition would be worse than useless, nor can you afford to forward his plan as he has suggested. You have not refused to receive the young lady, and you will always treat her with courtesy and kindness—he has no right to ask more at your hands."

"I am so glad, Meliora, that you agree with me; it is quite a relief to feel that I have not made a mistake. But why would you persist in refusing your counsel last night?"

"Because, my dear, I perceive that you treat my 'counsels' as a devout Romanist treats the Pope's Encyclical, and I do not choose to become your conscience. Besides, it is full time that you learned to go alone! I may not be always at your side, my child, to give the lead, nor is it expedient that you should always follow a leader. If you and I were separated, Joan, you would have to act not only for yourself, but for others. Brenda is wonder-

fully improved, but she will always need a guide; it will be many a day before Ruby is able to think and reason for herself. As for your father, he must always rest on some one, and that one ought to be his daughter Joan."

"Meliora, you speak as if separation were—not improbable! Do you mean anything?"

"Such relations as yours and mine, dear, are seldom continuous till life ends. So many things happen—so much that is unforeseen comes to pass. We have passed almost seven years together, you and I, and I have found by experience that one does not frequently go on for a much longer period without a break of some kind. It is one of the especial trials of governess life, that it entails so many separations; in spite of many a warning one roots oneself in the soil, only to be torn up when the inevitable time arrives. When I came to you, I felt very much as I should imagine a thriving shrub feels when first transplanted from the borders where it has flourished long and happily."

"I dare say you did; now that I know you, I am sure of it; but that is all the more reason why you should renounce any idea of farther transplantation. We are working together very well, I think,—oh, Meliora, I trust nothing has happened to vex you,—there is no 'little rift within the lute' which you and I have played so pleasantly together—surely?"

"No, oh no; I only spoke of what *might* be; for break-ups do come, and sometimes most unexpectedly."

"As we all know. But oh, Meliora,—it is very selfish of me, I am afraid,—but I do wish you had married poor papa when he asked you years ago. Then there would have been the tie of relationship to bind us together; you would have been naturally my leader—as you call yourself—for you would have been my mother, and I should have owed you a daughter's duty and affection. Yes, I cannot help wishing you had given me the right to call you 'mother,' though I think I could scarcely have loved or revered you more than I have and ever must."

"And I *think* I could not have loved you much more dearly, had you been my veritable daughter—my own flesh and blood. We have had many a trouble together, and

shared many a care and many a pain, but on the whole we have been very happy, have we not ? ”

“ As happy as could be, speaking from my own standpoint ; and I see no reason why we should not go on being happy in each other to the end—till death us do part ! You will never marry now, I fancy.”

“ I never shall, if I know my own mind. If I *could* have brought myself to it, I would have married your father ; but I could not. I could be his sister, his daughter, his dear friend ; but nothing more.”

“ Yet I am sure you love him ! You have proved it in a thousand ways ! ”

“ I do love him, but with the quiet, calm, unimpassioned affection I felt towards Maud’s dear husband, and which I still feel for Mr. May, who has always been to me as a true brother. Were your mother living, I might still cherish towards your father the affection which I gave him long ago, for it would not wrong her, even by a hair’s breadth.”

Joan sighed—“ I wish you could have cared ! Not that I ought to wish such a thing ! It would have been dreadful that you—a woman still in your prime, and full of healthy life and spirit—should be tied to a poor, helpless cripple, who could endow you with nothing but toil and care, poverty and responsibility.”

“ And yet, Joan, *if* I had loved him, his illness would only have made me cling the more tenderly to him. The true marriage is of the soul, and that dates from the first throb of actual love ; sometimes from the first day of meeting ! Am I not terribly romantic for an old maid—for a staid, elderly schoolmistress ? ”

“ If you are, so much the better ! If that is romance, I wish all women shared it. And, *Meliora*, do you not think it a mistake to hold marriage as a forbidden theme among young girls ? They *will* think of it ; they will talk of it among themselves ! Is it not wiser to speak of it from time to time, reverently, gravely, as of something too sacred to be touched upon lightly—at once too solemn and beautiful for careless, foolish jest and chatter ? ”

“ I do indeed, Joan. And now that we have elder girls under our care, I shall from time to time refer to the sacred

duties of wifehood, which it may please God to bless them with. I will try to make them understand that there is nothing more beautiful, and, at the same time, more holy, than the wedded love which the Lord Himself blesses. I will try to teach them to shrink from the careless jest, the foolish prattle, the unmaidenly banter, which too often prevails among young women, as they would shrink from light mention of religious truths ; to hold in abhorrence a marriage which is merely made for worldly purposes, for a name, an establishment, a certain position in society ! There is the first bell—I must send you away, my dear ; for I am not quite ready for the schoolroom.”

“ Nor am I ; Brenda, however, is sure to be at her post with the little ones. How much good Mrs. Clarke has done that girl ! ”

“ Maud is always doing some one good ; it is her way.”

“ And a very excellent way, too,” murmured Joan to herself, as she returned to her own room for a few moments, to ask the blessing she never failed to seek on the day’s labour in the schoolroom, and on her general intercourse with the pupils.

Frank did return to the charge, as his sisters had anticipated, and at last he wrung from them a formal invitation to Miss Cook to spend a fortnight at Chestnut House. Maggie, as Miss Carisbroke, undertook to write the necessary letter.

“ And mind,” she added, as she gave the missive into Frank’s hands, “ it is only for a fortnight. I have distinctly specified the time from next Tuesday till the following Monday week. Miss Cook will have the little room that Mary and Anna Lee generally occupy—they are going home on Saturday in order to be present at the wedding of their eldest sister, and they will return punctually on the day I have fixed for Miss Cook’s departure.”

“ Well, I suppose I must be content ; a bit of a loaf is better than no bread ! But I think you are all shockingly unsisterly ; Ada would give you no trouble, and it can’t cost much to feed one more, when there are so many to be provided for. I wouldn’t ask you to make any difference for her.”

“ Of course not. But we have quite decided that it

will not do to have Miss Ada here for a longer period than the stipulated fortnight."

"It would be so much more comfortable if I could see her here; I get to detest those Lupin Villa people, especially the mother, who is as cunning an old cat as ever I met with."

"Do not abuse one with whom you purpose to be intimately related. And as for cutting the family after marriage, that is simple nonsense; it could only be managed by your going abroad."

"What a good idea! Why should I not go abroad as well as Vinne and yourself? I might make my fortune out there, you know! and then I could snap my fingers at the Cook family,—at all of you, indeed, if you don't treat me properly now."

Maggie was silent, she prudently forbore the sharp answer that was on her tongue. Several years ago, she would unhesitatingly have given back an angry answer. Then Joan came in, tired with her long labour in the schoolroom, and not much disposed for conversation, and once more Frank began to reproach her with not meeting him half-way, as regarded Ada, who threatened to become a veritable bone of contention between the inconsiderate young man and his much-enduring sisters.

"Frank," said Joan, gravely, "I decline to continue the conversation: if you are not pleased with our conduct as regards your intended wife, I cannot help it. You may be sure we will treat her with all courtesy and kindness while she is here; but I expect she will be quite willing to return to Lupin Villa before the fortnight is expired. Our world is not hers, and she will weary of the dull monotony—as it will seem to her—of our daily life."

"Not if you interest her, and do your best to entertain her."

"We cannot devote ourselves to her as you suggest; nor do I think we should succeed in entertaining her, however strenuously we attempted it. When she finds that we do not care about fine dress, and that we do not talk gossip, or play at cards, I am afraid she will feel herself in strange and uncongenial society."

"I tell you what it is, Frank," said Maggie, suddenly

losing her patience, "you want us to stoop to her level, and that will not do. If she chooses to rise to ours we shall be very glad to assist her. But my belief is, she will not come at all! She had about enough of us the other evening. She found us insufferably dull, and our tone and style evidently irked and depressed her; besides, I am quite sure she despises us as schoolmistresses—as women who work for our daily bread."

And this last allegation Frank could not in conscience deny; he admitted it by silence. In fact, all the family had been doing their best ever since the engagement to drag him down to their own level of sham gentility, and there had been many covert hints as to the "vulgarity" of women earning money in any other way than by authorship. Schoolmistresses, especially, were voted outside the pale of society; the Misses Cook prided themselves on never having "done anything," except in the privacy of home, where a good deal of amateur millinery, dressmaking, upholstery, and even cooking was necessarily carried on. Uncle Ben, when called upon, as was not unfrequently the case, to supplement the limited family income, had more than once suggested that Ada should give lessons in music, that Anna Matilda should find a situation as lady bookkeeper, that Mariana should go out as morning governess, and that Lina should be sent to a good school, where she might graduate as a pupil-teacher, and fit herself for a future engagement as resident governess. But the young ladies scouted the idea of going out into the world to earn even the pocket-money of which they stood so sadly in need; and Mrs. Cook was so indignant that Uncle Ben was glad to beat a retreat, leaving a handsome sum behind him for the replenishment of the exhausted exchequer.

Only Rosamond and Lucilla, who as elder sisters were supposed to be needed at home, at all approved of their uncle's propositions. "We are too thick upon the ground," said Rosamond, "there is not enough for us to do at home, so we squabble and talk nonsense, and sometimes make ourselves talked about. We are always struggling to appear as 'independent ladies'; in fact, our whole life is one incessant struggle to keep up appearances. I am

tired of it ! I have a great mind to go out myself, since the others will not. I could get a situation of some sort, I am sure."

But all this was said before the engagements of Anna Matilda and Ada were accomplished facts ; and it was generally understood that nothing now was to be thought of which had not reference to the marriage of the two betrothed young ladies. Uncle Ben sent a long-promised electro-plated teapot, and at the same time a toast-rack of the same metal for Anna Matilda, who was the least loved and esteemed of all his nieces ! for he was a mild, gentlemanly man, perhaps just a little too sensitive as regarded his feelings, and Anna Matilda made him feel the sting of her saucy tongue more than once or twice. So that when her engagement was formally announced, he heartily pitied Richard Patterson ; wondered why any man should be so rash as to venture his happiness on a vixen ; and finally, began to think, *he* might as well marry and settle down, and spend his money on himself and his own family. And as he thought, it occurred to him that he knew the very woman who would make quite a charming Mrs. Ben.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TOURIST TICKETS.

To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new.

THE previsions of Joan and Maggie were abundantly fulfilled. Miss Ada Cook politely declined the Misses Carisbroke's kind invitation, &c., the plea of excuse being sundry engagements, and important family business. Maggie laughed as she handed the pink, shiny, perfumed note to Meliora, and said, "There ! the prophecy

is happily accomplished. Miss Ada is obliged to decline, and we are spared the necessity of offering ourselves up as an unwilling sacrifice on the shrine of brother Frank. We have done all that is required of us, and there is an end of it. How glad Joan will be !”

And very glad she was, even to thankfulness, for Joan had perceived more clearly than Maggie how entirely incongruous were the apparent ways of the Cooks with those of the Carisbrokes. Chestnut House and Lupin Villa had clearly nothing in common, either as regarded *ménage*, or principles of conduct ; nay, there was certainly a good deal of antagonism between the ideas and common usages of the two households.

Frank was bitterly disappointed. He carried the note to his lady-love, expecting to see her pretty, inane face brighten up wonderfully when she had made herself mistress of its contents. To his utter astonishment, her brow became clouded, her rosebud lips pouted, her eyes sparkled with something which was clearly *not* pleasure !

“ You surely don’t expect me to go and bury myself alive with all those old maids and the school-children for a whole fortnight ? ” she cried, as she turned angrily to her lover.

“ Why ! I thought you would like it ! ” he replied, trying to smother his vexation. “ I am sure they would be very kind to you, and you might pass a very pleasant time, and learn to know all about my family.”

“ I don’t want to know anything more about them than I do at present,” was the ungracious answer. “ I was just moped to death the other night, and they didn’t behave to me a bit as they did ought to.”

“ As *what* ! ” exclaimed Frank, aghast at the terrible *lapsus linguæ* of his betrothed. This was not the first time Ada had horrified him with her faulty English. All the Cooks spoke with tolerable correctness when they considered their words, but when they were off their guard they framed sentences that not the most adroit scholar could have possibly construed.

Ada coloured, and exclaimed, hastily, “ Oh ! we can’t all talk like governesses. And I got the prize for syntax, too, at my last school—a ladies’ college it was, where shop-

keepers' daughters were not received! You should see my specimen, written on the best letter-paper, and tied up with blue satin-ribbon. But nobody talks strict grammar, you know, out of a book!"

"Do they not?" replied Frank, scarcely repressing a smile. "It depends, I should imagine, upon one's early habits. But, Ada, you do not really mean that you refuse Maggie's kind invitation?"

"Yes, I do; they are too grand for me. They don't like me, and I don't like them! That is plain English, I hope?"

"Very plain; but it is a bad beginning. You quarrel with my family before you have fairly seen them. How will you get on together when you are Mrs. Carisbroke?"

"We shall get on best by keeping apart—as far apart as possible. When I promised to marry you, Frank, I never engaged to marry all those stuck-up school-mistresses. No, I won't go and stay at Chestnut House, except it is just now and then, for a breath of fresh air, and by way of a little outing. Why should I make a martyr of myself?"

"If you look upon it in that light, I have nothing more to say. But this is the first time I have heard my sisters spoken of disrespectfully."

"Oh, I don't mean to speak of them with disrespect, but they are schoolmistresses to the backbone—a sort of female cattle I detest. I never made friends with my own governesses. Ma said it was not good policy, for that sort of people always presumed."

Frank reddened. "I don't know what you mean, but one thing I can tell you, my sisters, excepting poor little Ruby, whose birth seemed to inaugurate all our misfortunes, were brought up in such luxury as you cannot even conceive."

"Did they really keep their carriage?"

"Most certainly they did, and Lavinia always had her own saddle-horse. Maggie did not care for riding. I had my own hack, too, and my father had always a good horse in the stable for his use."

"How stupid it was of you and your father to lose it all! However, I hope you will be a rich man again some

day, for there's nothing I hate like being poor. One ought always to marry to better oneself. Still, I would rather marry a poor gentleman than a rich tradesman like Richard Patterson. I can't think what possesses Anna Matilda to let herself down in such a way. But, of course, I shall never condescend to visit her."

Frank felt much inclined to leave her coolly, and so evince his displeasure; but the young lady perfectly understood her *métier*, and came and sat upon his knee, and pulled his whiskers, and called him her "handsome Franky," looking so pretty and innocent all the while, that his anger evaporated as speedily as it had arisen, and he went away more in love than ever with her pink and white face and her *mignon* charms. He only bargained that he should see the note in which the despised invitation was refused, for he was more than half afraid of unladylike pertness, and wholly afraid of inaccuracies in spelling and grammar, in spite of the "Prize for Syntax," presented by the Misses Primrose, of Cowslip College, "to their beloved pupil—Ada Caroline Juliana Cook."

Midsummer was now not far distant, and Joan was anticipating with delight the quiet time she and Meliora would have together, with only little Ruby to attend to. Brenda was going to spend the vacation at Eland with her friend Mrs. Clarke; Maggie had arranged to pay a final visit at Sydenham. She was daily expecting the letter from the Manders which should summon her to Australia.

"Were it not for papa," said Joan, when she and Meliora were making up their accounts, "we might indulge in a little trip to the seaside. I do so want to show Ruby the sea; and excepting that week at Cromer, and a day or two at Ramsgate, I have not had a salt-breeze myself for long."

"I will stay here willingly, if you and Ruby would like a change. I do not feel in the least inclined to bestir myself this summer. I never felt so lazy in my life; I ask nothing better than to sit on the heath or under our own chestnuts half the day, with my hands in my lap, and my eyes shut."

"Dear, you are overworking yourself! It is quite time you gave up, and took a little real rest. No, indeed,

I will not go to the coast without you ; and I do think we might leave papa with Mrs. Bray for just one fortnight ! He is pretty well in his general health, and now that he has that mechanical chair, he can manage for himself with very little help. I do not think he would feel neglected ; I will give him just a hint before we break-up, and see how he takes it."

"He is very fond of Mrs. Bray, and she is perfectly to be trusted. We must think it over, Joan ; I fancy we might afford it, and it would be delicious to be away from London in the very hot weather, only you and I and Ruby. What talks we would have, sitting on the shore, watching the tide, with the child picking up shells and pebbles ! Where shall we go ?"

"Ah, where ! That is the question. Every place now is getting so fashionable, and consequently *so dear*. There is that quiet little nook in North Wales that Maud was telling us of, but it would cost so much to get there, and we should be so far from home, in case our return became necessary. And yet I long to see Wales ! Just think ! I have never seen any mountains—only the hills about Cots-woldbury ; and I have wanted to go to the English lakes ever since I was a child. Do you remember that beautiful view of Windermere that used to hang in the drawing-room at Perrywood ?"

"Quite well. I wonder who has it now ? My poor Joan, yours has been, indeed, a life of trial. As a child you were kept in the background, and shut up in the nursery and schoolroom, while your sisters travelled about the country ; and later, when you were old enough to take your proper place, you had to deny yourself even small indulgences, and put your shoulder to the wheel, in order to help keep the wolf from the door. You have had no real girlhood, Joan."

"Now, really, *Meliora*, you are trying to make me discontented ! It is not like you to croak ; I am quite sure you are overdone ; you have not been looking like yourself since that time in February, when we all had influenza."

"I am not as strong as usual, I acknowledge. But I am growing old, you know !"

"Old! Why, you are just at your best, and *I* think you are handsomer every year."

"That is because you love me so much. Seriously, though, I shall be forty-five this autumn, and that is elderly, if not old."

"I suppose it is. Yet, still, quite too young to be at all failing, as people say; and you have never wasted your youth and strength in dissipation and defiance of the laws of health."

"For all that, I do feel myself ageing. I never used to be tired of work; I never wanted to go to bed till all the house was asleep, and I was always ready to get up the moment I awoke! I never knew what 'a bad night' meant till I had the toothache—which you and Brenda, by the way, dignified by the name of 'neuralgia'—as an aggravation to my influenza. Now I feel drowsy before supper; I have lost my liking for long walks, and when I hear the clock strike seven in the morning I wish with all my heart it were but five. Like the slug-gard, I say, 'Let me slumber again! you have waked me too soon.'"

"It all goes to prove that you want both rest and change, and you must have it. Now it is my turn to exhort, and to command! You say I am mistress here! Well, then, madam, I hereby ordain that you take at least *a month's holiday* away from home! I enjoin plenty of fresh air—a bracing sea-air would best suit your constitution, I am persuaded!—an entire rest, and freedom from every kind of responsibility. And that you may not suffer from solitude, I will bestow upon you the inestimable privilege of my own pleasant society."

"It is too delightful! I am greatly tempted, Joan;—we *could* afford it."

"We will afford it. Besides, it is nonsense to talk in that way; *you* can certainly afford it, only you choose to put your private income into the general stock."

"It is not so much now. The failure of that bank has greatly reduced my income."

"I know; but as you gave us of your store, so you must take of ours, and count it only as your right. See! these figures are right, I think. Now we may very well

take a few pounds for our journey ; we need not do things in style, but we will be comfortable ; and oh ! how delighted my Ruby will be ! We must not tell her till it is all finally arranged ; it would not do to disappoint her."

"Then you really mean it, Joan?"

"Really—most really ! I am in earnest ; I am going to—I don't exactly know where ; but wherever it may be, from John-o'-Groat's to Land's-end, you go with me, or we are alienated for life. So now, I hope, you quite understand, Miss 'Melia Martin, as our old friend, Mr. Green, used to say. For the first time in my life I am going to play the despot."

"Very well ; I shall not make any strenuous objection, provided your papa is content to be left to Mrs. Bray, and I think he will be. He was saying the other day when Brenda's visit was being talked about, that it was a pity we were not all going to Eland ! He will not be dull if he has plenty of books and some literary work on hand, and he will pass half his time under the great chestnuts on his Ilkley couch, or in his new locomotive chair that runs about so smoothly."

"Well ! the first thing is to speak to papa, and I will do that to-night, when I go to read to him ; the next is to consult Mrs. Bray, and get her to undertake all the responsibilities ; and that shall be your task, Meliora. Afterwards comes the pleasant and exciting question—*where shall we go ?*"

"I used to know a little place in the north, when I was young, where lodgings and everything else were wonderfully cheap. It is a long way off, that is the worst of it ; but we should save the extra cost of the journey, in our expenses, when once we got there."

"In the north ! That means Derbyshire, perhaps ? We Londoners call Birmingham the north, and Sheffield the extreme north. Newcastle seems almost at the pole, I believe, to a cockney born and bred."

"Then it is almost to the pole we shall go, if we decide to choose Argendale as our holiday haunt ; for it is on the shore of a great bay, and it commands splendid views of the Cumberland and Westmoreland mountains ; and if you don't mind going about in a cart, we might make any

number of cheap excursions on our own account. We should not be very far from Windermere—it is easily accessible from Argendale; Chalfonts, with its beautiful priory church, may be reached at a trifling cost, and the woods and rocks and wild shore of Earnseat are within a walk—a tolerably long one, certainly, but not more than you and I can manage. Perhaps we shall find some nice motherly body of a landlady, who will take charge of Ruby, when our expeditions lead us too far afield.”

“How your eyes sparkle! I declare, talking of this wonderful place in the far north, has quite brightened you up, Meliora. If the mere mention of Argendale—is that what you call it?—cheers you so much, what will not a month’s sojourn there effect? You will come back like a giant refreshed with new wine.”

“I hope so, for I do want strength. And the sight of the hills, and of the great grey cliffs, and of that wide open sandy shore, will be to me as new wine of the best quality; better far than quinine and iron, or even that venerable Madeira that Claudia insists on my drinking!”

“Very well; it is quite settled, then, if papa agrees; and even if he do not, as far as *I* am concerned, you must go, and Maggie can give up the Reynolds and be your companion. But I shall be sadly disappointed, I confess, if I do not see Argendale this summer. I am quite childish in the matter.”

“If you do not go to Argendale, I shall not. I might, of course, accompany Claudia and her family to Dieppe; but I rather dread the bustle and racket of so many young people, for George May’s boys and girls are going with them, I believe, and they are a very lively set. I should have enjoyed it a few years ago, but now I want to be quiet. I want to laugh when I like, and to cry when I like, to chatter when I like, and to be grumpy and frumpy when I like.”

“As if you ever were grumpy and frumpy! And if you cry, I shall administer your pet aversions—*sal-volatile* and red lavender.”

“I do not think even your threatened despotism would reach such a climax, my dear. Now, if we are to enjoy

our future leisure, we must proceed with our present work, and put Argendale quite out of our heads."

That evening, when Joan had shut the book she was reading aloud to her father, she was about to begin on the subject of the journey, when Mr. Carisbroke anticipated her by inquiring, "How long is it to the holidays, Joan?"

"Three weeks, papa, all but two days."

"Do you not think you need a little change?"

"I should like one amazingly, especially as I am determined to send Meliora quite away during the vacation. She is very far from well; it would do her all the good in the world to contemplate 'fresh woods and pastures new.' And she wants sea-air, I am persuaded."

"There is no reason why she should not have it, and you too. I can do very well with Mrs. Bray, if she will undertake me. No; Meliora is not well. I have noticed a change in her ever since the winter. She has lost her nice healthy complexion, and she is becoming painfully thin. You, too, look *seedy*, Joan, as if the labours of the half-year had been almost too much for you."

"I have felt a good deal worried of late; there was that squabble between Mademoiselle and the elder girls; then that naughty, deceitful housemaid; and lastly, Frank's engagement."

"We have not seen him lately."

"No, he is in high dudgeon, because we could not say we were ravished at the prospect of Ada for a sister-in-law. I do wish he had chosen a girl we could honestly have praised. This pretty child is extremely pretty—there can be no two opinions about it, and she has a very lovely voice, of unusual compass, which might be made a great deal of, if she would take the trouble to cultivate it. Alas! she calls herself a musician, and does not know what is meant by a syncopated note."

"Yes; she is very pretty, and I really wanted to take to her; but there was something about her I could *not* like. It struck me she was affected, and could be very pert also—I am sorry to say it, but she is not quite the lady."

"She has not been well brought up, Frank says. He seems increasingly to dislike her family."

"Ah, that is a pity; and she has several sisters, has she not?"

"Four or five, at least; and one of them, who rejoices in the euphonious name of Anna Matilda, is going to be married to a well-to-do tradesman in Hampstead Road. His name is Patterson."

"That was your poor mother's name, my dear."

"Yes; and Frank's second Christian name is Patterson, now I come to recollect. How curious that two sisters should marry two Pattersons who are entirely unconnected."

"Perhaps the young man may be a distant relation of ours. Our Pattersons, however, lived in the Borough Road, the last I heard of them, which was full twelve years ago. Richard Patterson, your mother's own cousin, kept a butter-and-cheese shop, and sold hams and poultry, and all that sort of thing. When we were first married, we always had a present of a hamper at Christmas from 'Cousin Dick,' containing a fine Norfolk turkey and a fat goose, and some very special *sausages*, made after Cousin Dick's own recipe."

"Then I believe your conjecture is correct. How very odd! The young man's name is Richard; I don't know about the father's. He, however, lives in the Borough, and keeps just the kind of shop you describe. He is very well off, Frank says; and Ada, who is quite indignant at the prospect of 'being connected with trade,' makes her sister very angry by continually alluding to a peculiar kind of sausage, which is in great repute, as 'Patterson's Own'!"

"Then, depend upon it, Miss Ada and the other young lady are engaged to marry *cousins*, several times removed. Does Frank guess?"

"I do not know, but I imagine not. He, too, has a foolish contempt for trade, and, therefore, he never alludes to our mother's family, who are, indeed, quite unknown to us, though we have always understood—I don't know by what means—that they were respectable, though rather vulgar, tradesfolk. He never signs his second name, not even the initial P. He is scarcely aware, perhaps, that such persons as these distant cousins of ours exist."

"Probably not, for we have never had the remotest connection with any of them, except this 'Dick,' who, I remember, was a married man, and who paid us the compliment of remembering us at Christmas-time. Your mother never wished to hear of them; *she* had an aversion to business people, though she was sprung from them herself. Her grandfather made a large fortune—I scarcely know how—in the retail trade; but she always mentioned him as a *merchant*. I believe he did something in the wholesale line during the latter years of his life. Then all her people were *Dissenters*, and that naturally was a strong barrier between us."

"I do not know that it should have been. You would not think it so now, papa?"

"No, my dear, I have learnt many a wholesome lesson since I last ascended the pulpit stairs of Perrywood Church, and one of these lessons has been to teach me that there is no such thing as *sect* in the true Church of God. Let every man and every woman be persuaded in his or her own mind; let each one worship God as conscience dictates, and glorify his or her profession by living in accordance with the dictates of the Gospel of Christ. But never mind the Pattersons just now or their Nonconformity. I am very tired, and only want to say that I hope you and Meliora will start on your travels the day after the school disperses. Mrs. Bray and I will get on together capitally; *she* is a Dissenter, by the way. She always knows exactly what I want, and she is in every way to be trusted. I call her a most estimable person."

"That she is. I do not know what we should do without her now. She sees to everything from the attics to the cellars, looks after the linen and the clothes, and *mothers* the girls when they have colds, or when they are especially naughty and in disgrace. I understand, then, if she consents, you do, to be left alone for at least several weeks of the holidays?"

"For the whole of them, if you think the change is doing you good."

"All right. Then we must find out to-morrow whether the railway companies issue tourist tickets to Argendale."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT ARGENDALE.

"For the strength of the hills we bless Thee,
Our God, our fathers' God."

THE breaking-up day came at last, and all was bustle and confusion. But as the hours sped on the house grew sensibly quieter, and when four o'clock struck the final departure had taken place; the schoolroom was empty, and Brenda was busily occupied in putting away all the unneeded paraphernalia of the work-a-day half-year. Her boxes and Maggie's were already packed, ready for their respective journeys on the morrow; Joan and Meliora stayed on at Hampstead one day longer that all necessary home arrangements might be made, and the temporary rule of Mrs. Bray properly inaugurated. Very cheerful were Mr. Carisbroke's good-byes to all the travellers, and Joan and Meliora were to keep a special diary during their sojourn in the fair "north countrie," to be forwarded to the invalid at certain intervals.

"And you will not be very dull, papa?" asked Joan anxiously, when the morning came, and their trunks were standing in the hall, duly strapped and addressed to "Argendale, Fellshire."

"I won't be dull at all," replied he, almost merrily. "Dear me! I can do without you for a little while, you conceited gipsy. I have a manuscript to finish for the bookseller's; an article to think about, for Mr. Gray's '*Christendom*'; an essay to strike off for the *Grosvenor Magazine*; and, better still, Mr. Gray has sent me a large parcel of books for review in his new literary journal. I shall be only too busy, and the time will fly."

"Promise not to do too much! You will knock yourself up if you work too hard. Remember how tiresome your head was after editing that German pamphlet in three days."

"Ah! I was not nearly so well then as I am now; and

I mean to take it easily. How strangely that sounds, though! As if I had ever done anything but take life easily. You would not be keeping school now, Joan, if I had put my shoulder to the wheel five-and-twenty years ago. If I had but recognised the responsibilities of my calling, and the sacredness of earnest labour before you were born, my daughter, we might all have been living happily and prosperously at Perrywood to this very hour."

"Never mind 'ifs' and 'might-have-beens,' papa. The past has had its teachings has it not? As for myself, I do not in the least regret my present position; the rôle of an idle young lady at home would not suit me at all. There is something in me that repels the bare idea of a life of inglorious ease. That I may labour, and *not* in vain, is all I ask; let me wear out, rather than rust out, is my earnest prayer; and, if God will, I trust to die in harness."

Mr. Carisbroke looked admiringly on the noble face of the enthusiastic girl. From whom did she derive the high endeavour and energetic temperament, the undaunted spirit, and clear-sighted judgment which rendered her so much wiser than her years warranted? Not from him, alas! and certainly not from her mother; the Carisbrokes had always been renowned for their love of luxury and ease, their want of rigid principle, and their inherent selfishness. And if poor Louisa were a specimen, the Pattersons must have been even less commendable than the Carisbrokes.

"Joan," he said fondly, but very sadly, "how your brave spirit condemns me. All too late, I would set to work, a toiler in God's vineyard; why did I waste in self-indulgent ease and apathy the days that are gone!"

"Dear papa, it is not too late for God's work; it is never too late for that, while breath and sense remain, I am convinced. Besides, you *are* at work; clerical—I should rather say ministerial—toils are not the only ones acceptable to God; *He* smiles upon all faithful service, such as you render here, among our young people. Your influence in this house is more for good than you are aware of; you have preached many a telling sermon at your Bible-class, and more by your example of patience

and faith while laid aside from active duties and deprived of all enjoyment of earthly life."

"Nay, my dear, not quite so bad as that! Many enjoyments of the life of this world are still mercifully left to me; I have the full possession of my senses; my faculties are as entire as ever; my hands still obey the dictates of my brain, and my sight is marvellous for my age. It is only these miserable legs that won't even serve me for standing upright, much less for locomotive purposes. I do try to be patient, Joan; nevertheless I say often to myself—'Oh, the days—the blessed days, when I went whithersoever I would, and needed no helping hand!' but God's will be done."

"Amen! It is natural, I am sure, that you should bewail the past sometimes, and sigh for lost strength of body. But God never wants us to be unnatural; He only wishes us to rest in Him and wait patiently to the end. If there were no regret, where would be the trial of our faith? If the cup were not bitter, how would it serve us as a spiritual tonic—as a test of child-like obedience?"

"I know *that*. By the grace of God I am what I am. Now, child, we must leave off talking, for I see your cab driving up the avenue. Come back strong and blooming; enjoy your holiday to the utmost. You have well earned your season of rest and pleasure, and, I need hardly say, take every care of Meliora; she is very far from well. And here is my little Ruby come to say 'good-bye.'"

Late that same evening Joan, Meliora, and the child Ruby found themselves in the comfortable parlour of the farmhouse, where lodgings had been secured for them by Mrs. May. It was a wide, low room, quaintly furnished, and looking over the bay towards the lake mountains that in the soft summer twilight showed grandly above the nearer fells. It was, as we know, Joan's first glimpse of the "everlasting hills," and it filled her with reverence and almost rapturous awe. The tide was low, and there was a vast expanse of shining, opal-tinted, wet sand. Far away the waters rippled like a netting of pure gold, while one large planet shone palely forth in a cloudless sky, above a fading horizon, still, however, glowing with the sunset hues of the fair June night. Ruby, almost asleep

before she reached her journey's end, was put to bed, and Joan and Meliora were alone together; the one almost too much oppressed by the wonderful new beauty of the scene without, the other too wearied for much speech. Only Joan said, just before the candles came in, "I do thank you, Meliora, for bringing me to this lovely place. I had no idea that our own England was so well worth seeing."

"I knew you would care for this place—like it at first sight, and after a little while love it as a sort of home. It is long since I was here; but when I saw the Knot, with its dark fir-crown, and the evening sun slanting across its verdant slopes, I felt as if I saw once more the face of a dear old friend! There is an individuality in mountains that belongs to no other feature of natural scenery."

"I can quite believe that. Are you very much tired, Meliora?"

"Well, yes, I must confess to being inordinately weary—and you?"

"I am reviving since my cup of tea. I feel as if I should like to make a rush up one of those mountains."

"You would not reach the foot of the nearest before morning, even if you set out on the instant. And as for *rushing* up a mountain, even you, Joan, with your long legs and springy step, would have to make many a halt before you reached the top."

"I suppose so; but I should like to try. I must climb a mountain or two before I turn my face southwards again."

"With all my heart, so that you do not require my company the whole way. I would advise you to commence, however, with the lower hills. You will find my dear old Knot rather a sturdy climb; but the prospect from the top on a clear summer evening is something past conception, till your eyes have seen it. At present, I think, our wisest plan is to go to bed."

"Well, yes," said Joan, reluctantly, loth to leave her post by the open window, where she could watch the last glimmer of daylight fade softly into the midsummer gloaming, that does duty for darkness all night long at that season of the year. The rosy clouds had melted away by this time, the mountains showed black and awful

against a sky of crystal clearness, and in the west there was a broad line of yellow amber, which would linger on, only paling slowly till the red dawn touched the summits of the opposite hills. The evening star shone forth gloriously now, casting its silvery reflection on the far-off sea; the air was fragrant with the breath of flowers, and the murmur of the incoming tide sounded like a lullaby.

"It is so sweet," she said, as she closed the diamond-paned casement, putting aside a spray of honeysuckle as she spoke. "I never felt anything like it! London seems to be in another world, and it is as if we had left town quite a month ago, instead of this very morning. Yes; let us go to bed; the sooner we are asleep, the sooner will it be to-morrow! I am sure you will get well and strong, Meliora, in this balmy yet bracing atmosphere."

"I hope so."

And then they went upstairs, and very soon Joan was happily in the land of forgetfulness. She had meant to rise with the sun, or very soon after him; but when she awoke there were sounds of life below, and the little farmhouse world was all astir. Hens were clucking, ducks were quacking, geese were waddling across the thymy stretch of turf before the porch; bees were humming, birds were singing, cows were lowing in a distant field, and through all there was the low monotone of the tide, like a solemn accompaniment to sweetest airs.

Meliora still slept; but Ruby was rubbing her dark eyes and wondering where she was. Joan and Ruby occupied one room, Meliora another; and there was a door between, so that they could be separate or together as they chose. Joan closed the door now, that Meliora might not be disturbed. When Ruby was dressed, they went downstairs, and found breakfast awaiting them in the parlour, that already looked like home, and wore a pleasant aspect of occupation. They carried Meliora's tray to her chamber, telling her she must resign herself to be waited upon like an invalid till she grew stronger. She answered brightly that she could not remember ever having breakfasted in bed in all her life, save when, as a child, she was kept in durance vile for nearly a week by the measles. "But," added she, as Joan took the top off

her egg, and Ruby placed half-a-dozen wild strawberries on her plate, "it is very nice to be petted and waited on! Take care you don't spoil me, children."

"As if you *could* be spoiled, Meliora."

"It is only little girls and little boys that get spoiled," said Ruby, gravely. "Grown-up people cannot be spoiled."

"Ah! cannot they, Ruby?" And Joan smiled one of those rare and transient smiles that lighted up her dark, earnest face into actual beauty. "I am afraid I shall be spoiled when the time comes to go back to Hampstead. I feel more like a wild woman of the woods, or a nymph of the shore, than a staid, discreet schoolmistress. It is well my pupils cannot see me!"

"One of them sees you, Joany," replied Ruby; "but, then, I am your child as well as your scholar, am I not?"

"Yes, darling; my own pet child!—petted, but not *spoiled*. Where did you get those strawberries?"

"In that little wood close at hand; they grew on the bank there under the wall. They are so scarlet and so big! Will you have some more, Meliora?"

"No, thank you, darling, not now; but you shall gather me some for luncheon. And what splendid cream!"

"Our landlady calls that a halfpenny worth of cream! I believe we should be charged about sixpence for it at home; and is not the bread good, and the butter as sweet as a nut! As for the ham, it is simply *ambrosial*!"

"We shall all be spoiled if we do not take care," laughed Meliora. "Now, children, run and finish your own breakfasts; I want to get up and go down to the shore."

Oh, what a morning that was! What a day it was, from that merry breakfast-time till the sun sank down again behind the fells! Our friends lived almost out-of-doors, for they were on the shore-rocks all the morning, resting on the turf in the shade for the best part of the afternoon, and rambling about a lovely upland heath in the evening.

And that day was the counterpart of many other days, for the weather was brilliant, and it seemed to all three a sin and a shame to stay within four walls while the sunshine rested on rock and fell and shore, and the breezes

blew so softly, and the whole world about them glowed with radiant summer beauty. The diary, though, was faithfully and jointly kept for the benefit of the dear invalid at home, and Ruby was very proud when she was allowed to add her cramped round-hand contributions to the closely-written pages of her elders. One day, when both Meliora and Joan were absent on some expedition, she wrote:—

“*July 1st.*—I am at home to-day because Joan and Meliora think where they are going is too far for little legs, and there is no carriage-road. Besides, I am tired with running about last night, all over Earnseat Knot, which everybody here calls *the* Knot; and a knot in this country means a pretty steep mountain, or hill, rather, with a clump of trees on the top. Earnseat has trees all up one side, but the other side is bare and wild, and at one end is a *precipidge*! Up on the top of the Knot we saw ever so far—miles and miles and miles! We saw the Isle of Man, like a little cloud on the sea; and we saw heaps of mountains beyond the channel that flows at the base of this great giant Knot. There was Coniston Old Man, and the Lamb—not a ewe lamb, but some other sort, with a tail three miles long!—and the Langdale Pikes, which I like best of all the mountains, because I learned to know them first, and Helvellyn, and Saddleback, and some that Meliora thought must be over the Border, by which she meant to say they were in Scotland! And we saw the village of Earnseat far below us, and the estuary of the river that runs into the Bay—I forget its name—and many villages and churches, and grey towers, and woods, and rocks called *scars*, and a great deal more worth telling about, only my fingers are so tired, and I have used up all the paper I can find, and Meliora and Joan will write the rest to-morrow. So good-bye, dear papa. Don't you want to kiss Ruby?”

But, generally speaking, Ruby went with the other two, and it was found that she could get over the ground almost as well as Meliora, though she could not, of course, compete with Joan, who performed wonderful feats of pedestrianism without being at all tired.

“Such a happy, peaceful time,” they used to say after-

wards, when Argendale was a memory of the past ; when the turn of the tide was the most important event of the day, and when a visit to a distant fell was a grand excitement. And Joan had her wish concerning the ascent of mountains, for she climbed the "Old Man," and one of the Langdale Pikes, as well as many lower eminences—under proper guidance, of course—while Meliora and Ruby picnicked in some quiet spot a little way up the mountain.

Twice Joan joined a party who were on a climbing expedition, and something of intimacy naturally ensued. The Warrendales were people of wealth and of position in the neighbourhood, and they found great pleasure in conversing with Miss Martin and her young companion, Joan ; for, as Mrs. Warrendale observed to her husband, it was not often two such cultivated, thoroughbred gentlewomen came that way. For awhile they wondered what might be the relationship between the elder and the younger lady.

One day Ruby threw considerable light on the subject by observing, "Meliora is no relation at all to us ; but she is the same to Joan as a mother ; and I am Joan's little sister, and *she* is the same to me as a mother."

"Then 'Meliora' must be the same to you as a grandmother !" said Arthur Warrendale, the only son, a young man to whom Ruby had taken a great fancy.

But Miss Ruby was offended, and remarked afterwards, "I did not laugh, though I know I was meant to, for I did not choose that anybody should speak so freely of our dear Meliora. A *grandmother*, indeed !"

"My dear Ruby," laughed Meliora, "it is very kind of you to stand on your dignity on my behalf ; but if I had ever been a mother I might now be a grandmother, for I am growing fast into an old woman. Mr. Arthur Warrendale meant no disrespect."

The young man in question was, as a rule, singularly grave and reticent ; but somehow Ruby's childish charms conquered his reserve, and when she had forgiven him for his little jest about Meliora, the two became fast friends, and went out together on expeditions of their own—"on their own hook," as Frank would have phrased it.

And the days glided on, calmly and uneventfully.

Meliora certainly gathered strength, though there was not all the improvement that had been hoped for. Joan was happier than she had ever been in her life—freer, brighter, merrier,—not a bit like the staid, correct “Miss Joan” of the Chestnut House schoolroom. But already her furlough was approaching its end; the weeks had flown, and now they could count the days that remained to them at Argendale.

“Have you ever been to the Unfathomable Lake?” asked Minnie Warrendale, Arthur’s only sister, one day.

They never had; whereupon Minnie and Arthur began to organise an excursion thither. The distance was not great, but the scenery was wild, and the peculiarities of the place so remarkable, that it ought on no account to remain unvisited by people who pretended to know the neighbourhood. So the expedition was fixed for an early day, and the Warrendales made themselves entirely responsible for the whole affair. It was to be *their* picnic.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE UNFATHOMABLE LAKE.

“My God! I know not *when* I die,
What is the moment, or the hour,
How soon the clay may broken lie,
How quickly pass away the flower;
Then may Thy child preparèd be
Through time to meet eternity.”

“Is the lake really unfathomable, Arthur?” asked Miss Ruby, as she, with her tall companion, stood upon the rocky heights above the mysterious little mere they had come to visit.

“The country people here all say it is, Ruby,” he replied; “and I believe it is so deep that the bottom has

never yet been found. It is probably of immense depth, and is, without doubt, connected with the sea, since—so I am told—it is now and then, at certain intervals, affected by the tide. Its real name is Hayeswater !”

“And this mountain on which we stand?”

“Is called Beetle Fell; and it is not a mountain; no eminence under 1,500 feet being ever dignified by the title in this part of the country.”

“I understand. And where are the beetles?”

“The fell gets its name from its curious shape, which you cannot perceive till you are several miles away from it. Crossing Warstone Crag—where we found the Limestone Polypody the other evening, Ruby—it looks exactly like a great sprawling beetle with an uncommonly broad back. But if you want beetles, there is a lovely green and gold one just at your feet. And there are plenty of blue butterflies.”

“It is a very beautiful place, and I shall never forget it as long as I live. Meliora is going to sketch it, I think. It will not be easy, I fancy, there are so many tumbled-about rocks. Was there ever an earthquake here?”

“Yes, there was; though how long ago I cannot even guess. Geologists, I believe, say it happened at least two thousand years back; the people of the district, however, assign it a modern date—for the legend goes that here a large town or hamlet was swallowed up, while in the further field yonder, where there is a pool or tarn, called ‘Little Hayeswater,’ a parish church with a steeple and peal of bells disappeared at the same time. An old woman who lives across Braithwaite Fell gravely assured me that when she was young, she often sat by the tarn on a Sunday evening and heard the bells ringing or chiming for church deep down under the water.”

“That cannot be true. If there were any bells they must have rusted away ages ago; besides, they could not ring themselves, and the ringers, unless they ran away when the earthquake came, would all be drowned !”

“Exactly so, it is only a superstition, of course; people—uneducated people, that is—who live in such solitudes, surrounded by mysteries of nature, with which they are nevertheless familiar, are always prone to superstitions—

some of them very curious and suggestive. And this place is certainly solitary and mysterious, and what we north-country folk call *weird* or *eerie*."

"But you are sure that there really was an earthquake, 'once upon a time,' as the story-books say?"

"As sure as one can be of anything! Science demonstrates positive facts; and our own senses tell us that some mighty powers must have upheaved those huge masses of rock that lie 'tumbled-about,' as you say, like wrecks of a Titan world; but that you cannot quite understand, my little lady."

"No; I never heard of a 'Titan world.' I will ask Joan to tell me all about it; *she* knows everything, you know!"

"Does she, really? Then I shall have a great many questions to ask her some day. It must be quite delightful to know 'everything,' little Ruby."

"Ah, you are laughing! But Joan really does know a great deal—a very great deal! and she is quite the best person in the world."

"Her little sister thinks so, at least," he replied, kindly. "Well! I quite agree with you. I am sure that Joan is very good, and very clever, and last, not least, very handsome!"

"Is she handsome? Yes, now I come to think of it, Joan is the most beautiful person I ever saw. Oh, Arthur, what a curious place! I should like to get down there."

"This is what we call the *trough* of Beetle Fell; the sides are quite smooth, you see, and the bottom grassy and flat. The earthquake, whenever it happened, made this natural trough in the solid rock, I suppose. I fancy there are plenty of wild strawberries at the bottom; I daresay I can manage to get you down, if you go a few yards to the right. Yes! here is the spot I remembered; the rocks are jagged and broken here; I will let myself down first, and then I can lift you. No one has been before us, perhaps, and we shall have a right royal feast of strawberries."

And so they had. The bottom of the trough was covered with rich, red, ripe strawberries, of an immense size, and luscious to the taste; no strawberry, *Hautboy* or

British Queen, ever equalled these wild Beetle Fell strawberries in delicious flavour.

"If we could only take some to the others!" said generous little Ruby, when she had found for herself how acceptable was this mountain fruit. "I wish I had a basket."

"I will improvise one. My straw hat, well lined with leaves, will make a very respectable basket. Let us begin. We will take our own fill, and then cater for our company; there is an abundant supply for all."

Half-an-hour afterwards the two scrambled out of their hiding-place, and came down the rugged fell-side to a shady nook, where Mrs. Warrendale and her maids were spreading the cloth for dinner. And a right noble spread it was; for there were pigeon-pies, and pressed beef, and fowls and tongue, and potted char, and fruit-tarts and creams, and lobster salad which was concocted on the spot, the lettuces being duly washed in a crystal streamlet that ran from the unfathomable lake. Ruby was delighted to help; she had never, in *all* her life, she declared and reiterated, known anything *half* so charming! How much she would have to tell Agnes Macdonald, her bosom friend and classmate at Chestnut House!

The day was just what the whole party could have wished, warm, but not sultry; the sky not cloudless, but free from any indication of rain; the breeze soft and balmy, just enough to refresh those who were climbing, and to temper the heat of the sun's rays, when occasionally they shone out in all their splendour.

Nevertheless, the elders felt especially fatigued after their *al fresco* repast. Mr. and Mrs. Warrendale and Meliora were glad to rest in the shadow of a great ivy-clad rock that overhung a gentle slope of short, thymy turf, and Ruby, who had been skipping about the whole morning, had no objection to stay with them. Joan, Arthur, and Minnie Warrendale set off together to explore the vicinity of Little Hayeswater; but Minnie, who had a weak ankle from a last year's sprain, was soon glad to return to the rural drawing-room, and select for herself a couch on which she could comfortably take her afternoon *siesta*.

So Joan and Arthur wandered on through wood and ravine, and rested at last on the green shores of the little lake, which sparkled in the sunlight, within its boundary of emerald grass and lovely water-lilies. They sat there, in a shady spot, the whole afternoon, talking Tennyson and Browning, Wordsworth, Byron, and Longfellow. Only once they saw a living creature; a very old man, with patriarchal beard, over whom at least fourscore of summer suns and winter snows had passed, came up to them, hoping, perhaps, for some small gratuity. He told the pair, whom he evidently took to be lovers, that he was so old that he had lost all count of his years; but he supposed himself to be well over ninety. He lived in a small hamlet, "township," he called it—on the other side of Beetle Fell, and he came every day, when the weather was fine enough, to sit by the unfathomable waters, which seemed to have a singular attraction for him.

"What is your name?" asked Joan presently, thinking he might have lived in the ancient days when the legendary church and village were overwhelmed, so hoary and primitive was his appearance.

"They call me 'Father Roger,'" he answered, "because I am older by far than any other person for miles round; I think sometimes I shall never die! Perhaps the Lord has forgotten me."

"Nay," said Joan, moved by the almost hopeless tone. "The good Lord never forgets any of His children; from infancy to extreme old age He is always with them. He will surely call you ere long, perhaps sooner than you think. Do you want to go?"

"Ay, that I do," he answered, pathetically. "There is not one of my own blood left, and all my friends are under the churchyard sod. Even the old people are too young to talk with *me* of times gone by; and the young folk, who love and work, and marry and are given in marriage, seem to belong to another world. No one here has seen what I have seen; no one knows what I know, and the very children look at me with frightened eyes; they think I ought to be fast asleep in my grave, with the grass and the moon-daisies growing over me. The Lord grant me patience."

"He will grant you patience and faith and hope, too, if you seek them," returned Joan, gently. "Don't you remember what Job said? 'All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change comes.'"

Father Roger shook his grey, bowed head. "No, missie," he said, vaguely, "I don't think I remember—perhaps I do, perhaps I don't; I don't know now what I do remember. I can't tell what I dream from what I think—it's all a dream now. To-morrow, m'appen, I shall think it is a dream that I saw you two here by the old tarn-side. It is an uncanny place, though, for young folk to come to and tell their love to each other. But m'appen, ye are sister and brother?"

"We are acquaintances, that is all," said Joan, colouring a little as she spoke. She was wondering whether she, "a preceptress of youth," as Ada Cook had called her, ought to have wandered away to these solitudes with Arthur Warrendale. Her good sense, however, told her that she had transgressed no law of propriety; neither he nor she had planned a *tête-à-tête*, and their conversation had been what all the world was welcome to listen to, if so it chose. Joan, though perhaps a little strict in her ideas, as became her position, was no prude. No truly modest woman is ever a prude, for the ideas of a prude are necessarily the reverse of nice.

"Oh, take care! take care!" said the patriarch, shaking his hoary head; "men bring maids sorrow; and no love prospers that is told by the unfathomable waters."

"Well, father," laughed Arthur, "we are telling no love to-day, so don't be concerned on our behalf. Do you know the legend of this pond?"

"I know the legend of this *tarn*," he said, laying strong emphasis on the final substantive; "surely ye know it a' yourselves."

"We know about the earthquake, of course; and how there is a church—a parish church—deep down somewhere in the lake, though how anything can abide in a bottomless pit is more than we can understand. But perhaps this tarn is not so deep as the larger one?"

"Ay, but it is," was the solemn reply. "Big Hayeswater has got no bottom, but Little Hayeswater is far

deeper. And as for the Kirk, have not these old eyes seen it all in ruins—but the singers in their seats, and the high altar with its lights, many and many a time !”

“Now, that is a sight I would give a five-pound note to see,” said Arthur, gravely. “Tell me, when did you see it last ?”

“So many years ago, that I can’t recollect. It is never seen now—it is all sunk and sunk away, m’appen; but not a year ago I heard the bells chiming, and the congregation chanting, ‘I was glad when they said unto me, let us go unto the House of the Lord.’”

“And you heard the very words ?”

“No; oh, no! But that is what they always do chant, only it is in Latin; for there was no English in those days, the old story says. It was thousands on thousands of years ago when it all happened.”

“It must have been in the pre-Adamite era!” said Arthur, looking quite gravely at Joan. “You understand, Father Roger, it could not have been a Christian church.”

“I don’t understand,” said the old man, stolidly; “I know what the story says, and it’s so old, it must be true. And the priest goes on saying *mass* for ever and for ever, for the impenitent souls that died in the earthquake.”

“I am sure the priest is very greatly to be pitied, is he not, Miss Carisbroke? He must be dreadfully tired of his job. What impenitent souls they must have been, to require, at the lowest computation, two thousand years of praying for!” The old man turned away indignantly.

“Hush!” whispered Joan, softly; and then she added in French, “You should not say anything to vex him, he is so very old, and it cannot do him any harm now to believe it, absurd though it be. Poor old man!”

“I was thoughtless,” replied Arthur, instantly. “I did not mean to hurt his poor old feelings. I wonder if he knows what the mass is! Did you ever go to mass, Father Roger?”

He shook his head, and answered angrily, “Of course not! There is no mass now; it was the service of the old religion that was swept away after Bloody Mary ruled the land, and had her head chopped off for burning the folks in Smithfield Market, up in London town.”

Neither Joan nor Arthur tried to correct the patriarch's historical inaccuracies, nor did they contradict his assertion respecting the non-existence of the mass; but Joan said presently, "Yes, those were times of darkness when what you call 'the old religion' reigned in England. We should thank God that our lot is cast in better days; we have an open Bible, and we may read it, and we may worship God exactly as we think best. Can you see to read your Bible?"

"I have one, a very old one, that was my wife's, but I can't read it. I never learned to read. Reading was not thought good for common folks in my young day."

"But you hear it read in church?"

"No, not now, except once a year, on St. Peter's Day. If I didn't go to church then, I shouldn't get the *dole*. And I don't listen much to what the parson says, for he's a bad 'un, he is, and don't ought to be a parson."

"I am sorry to hear it; but the Bible would be just the same, you know, whoever read it," said Joan. "I wish you could read."

"My wife was a scholar, and she could write her name as plain as any lady! She was the finest scholar in all these parts," he answered, with evident pride; "but she went to heaven well-nigh forty years ago, perhaps more—I can't recollect. *She* was a good woman, and kept her church. But I remember it as if it were yesterday; ay, and better than yesterday, for my memory is of no use to me for what's just going on about me. M'appen though I'll remember you and the young lady, sir, for a bit."

"M'appen if I give you this, you will remember us the more easily," said Arthur, putting half-a-crown into his trembling hand.

"And I should like to read you a few verses," said Joan, taking her little Testament from her pocket, "though it is not St. Peter's Day. That is just past." And she began with, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life;" and finished with, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

"I mind my old woman reading that," the aged man

said, when Joan closed her book. "I wish I knew where to find *Him* you read about, for I do want rest. I've had a weary pilgrimage."

"Speak to Him, and He will hear you, and He will give you the rest you long for."

Father Roger sighed, but he muttered to himself, "*I will give you rest. If the Lord says so, He will, I suppose. But don't be long about it, Lord, for I'm a-weary. Four-score and ten—fourscore and ten, and beyond; and Death goes about, and mows down old and young and middle-aged, and leaves me alone! I'm very tired of being here. Good-bye, and good luck to ye both.*"

"A curious sort of person," said Arthur, when the old man was quite out of hearing. "I should not be surprised if he were a hundred years of age! I wonder, now, how it feels to be so old; so very, *very* old!"

"And I wonder, too! It must be sad, must it not, not only to outlive one's own generation, but the generation of one's children? To belong entirely to the past, to have no part or lot in the life of the present, and to feel one's faculties benumbed, one's energies stilled, one's hopes and fears even paralysed!"

"It must be sad, indeed—*terrible*!"

"Yet it may come to either of us—to any one!"

"It may; but I think extreme senility happens chiefly, if not entirely, to those who live more or less a mere animal life. This man never learned to read—never cared to go to church, never cultivated such talents as he had! How true it is, that unto him that hath shall be given, while unto him that hath not shall be taken away even that he hath! Five talents unimproved must certainly leave one in far worse case than the fraction of a talent made the best of. Our experience of life would teach us *that*, even if the Bible had said no word about it."

"It would, indeed!"

"And how dreadful it must be to feel one's best days waning, and one's strength decaying—to *know* that the night is at hand, and be conscious that no good work has been done—few duties fulfilled, and life itself wasted!"

Poor Joan sighed, and thought of her father's lament. But then he had awakened to a sense of his shortcomings,

he had not waited till the eleventh hour, and surely God would accept true service, even though long delayed and tardily rendered. "But oh, how happy are they," she thought, "who give their best, the flower and morning of their days! God grant that I may do His will, and not my own, now and evermore!"

"If you could choose," said her companion, presently, "would you live to be old, or die in the bloom of life, ere its glow and ardour fade?"

"If I could choose, I would not," she answered, quickly. "God knows what is best for me; I only ask to stay till my work here is done. But when that work shall end I cannot tell. I have heard of persons praying for speedy death, and afterwards thanking God that their petition was not heard, so much of life's brightness and sweetness being granted them when they least expected it. The happiest person must be one who simply and sincerely accepts God's will, be it long life, or early death, sorrow or joy, success or failure! But is not long life a blessing? Did not the Psalmist say, 'With long life will I satisfy thee'?"

"You must remember that the Old Testament saints had no distinct hope of a life beyond the grave. The joy of immortality was reserved for a later day, to be revealed in and by Christ Himself. Long life here was the best they could confidently anticipate—those old prophets and patriarchs of the elder day! We know that our Redeemer liveth; Job did not, for the word Redeemer, as I dare say you are aware, is mistranslated: the true word is '*Avenger*,' and his declaration was, that out of his flesh—not *in it*—should he see God."

"Yes; papa told me all that. But does not the seeing of God out of the flesh imply a belief of immortality?"

"It certainly does; but I am not scholar enough to be very clear as to the exact text. Only it seems pretty certain that till Jesus Christ came into the world and died and rose again, there was no definite expectation of a life beyond the grave. There might have been vague hopes and fond glimpses of an eternal future, earnest longings after the glory that was, in the fulness of time, to be revealed; but it was not with them as it is with us! they

could not, did not, know that God had prepared for them such good things as pass man's understanding."

Soon afterwards they were summoned to tea, and Joan almost wondered at the hilarity of her late companion as he helped the maids to boil the kettle, and made Ruby very happy by giving her all sorts of tasks to perform. The little lady was as busy as she could be, and overflowing with happiness. To her great astonishment Joan discovered, while talking to Mrs. Warrendale, that Arthur was rather younger than herself. She had supposed him to be at least five-and-twenty! He was evidently one of those persons who develop early, and to whom everything comes betimes.

When tea was over, the whole party adjourned to the field, in the midst of which Little Hayeswater shone like an immense sapphire, under a cloudless evening sky. Meliora exclaimed with rapture at the sight of the countless water-lilies, the greater portion of which remained still expanded. They were her favourite flowers, she said. Could she not gather a few to take home with her?

"By no means!" was the verdict of the Warrendales, the ground near the edge of the tarn being remarkably shelving and slippery, and altogether so yielding and treacherous as to be quite unsafe. "At the bottom of that bank the morass commences," said Arthur; "we never go much beyond the spot on which we stand."

Ruby looked wistfully at the water-lilies, but said nothing. By-and-by she slipped away, back to the shore of the larger lake. She had noticed that at the farther end some lilies grew, and she was sure she could reach them for Meliora. Urged by some impulse, Arthur also bent his steps that way, while the rest remained by Little Hayeswater, listening to Joan's account of the old man who never went to church but on St. Peter's Day. How sweet it was, with the evening air all fragrant with surrounding flowers, and the evening sun full upon the great grey cliffs of Beetle Fell. They could hear the light laughter of the maids as they packed up the almost-emptied hampers, mingled with the plaintive cry of the plover, whose solitary haunts had been invaded.

Suddenly there were loud shrieks, and cries of "*Help!*"

and the voice that cried was surely Arthur Warrendale's. All rushed in one direction, but Joan, fleetest of foot, came first upon the scene of action. Up to his knees in a curious, tenacious sort of white marl, that was evidently of the nature of quicksand, stood Arthur, drenched and dripping, with Ruby in his arms. The little girl, knowing nothing of the treacherousness of the ground to which she hastened in pursuit of the lilies, had quickly found herself sinking in the singular soil on which she stood. While stooping to examine some of the myriads of tiny, fragile shells that surrounded her on every side, she felt a sudden moisture rising far above her ankles. Her feet were in two holes, and covered with water! Alarmed and dismayed, she made a desperate plunge, only, however, to land herself in a more precarious situation. Again she struggled bravely, and the next minute was in the chill waters of the Unfathomable Lake.

Just then Arthur Warrendale perceived the child's terrible danger, and at the imminent risk of his life he dashed in after her. Happily, the ground there shelved gradually from the edge, and, almost as by a miracle, the young man succeeded in grasping instantly Ruby's holland frock as she began to drift towards the fathomless abyss. With Ruby in one hand, he struck out boldly for the shore.

Joan came up just in time to receive the swimmer's burden, while Mr. Warrendale, with blanched face, helped both her and his son out of the inland-quicksand on which they had intruded.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"THE EVERLASTING HILLS."

"Enough that blessings undeserved
Have marked my erring track;
That wheresoe'er my feet have swerved,
His chastening turned me back;
"That death seems but a covered way,
Which opens into light,
Wherein no blinded child can stray
Beyond the Father's sight."

It was a shock, a terrible shock! Yet, beyond present fear and agitation, there was little mischief done. Ruby was frightened and exhausted, but she had not for a single second lost consciousness. Her preserver had sped so promptly and so skilfully to her rescue that she had suffered only a momentary submersion. In five minutes she was wrapped in cloaks and shawls, and in Mrs. Warrendale's carriage, which was already awaiting her pleasure at the top of the rocky lane which led to the foot of the Beetle Fell. They drove rapidly home, and Ruby was treated to a warm bath, a cup of hot tea, and put to bed, where she soon declared she was quite as well, if not better, than ever she had been in her life.

It was more than either Joan or Meliora could say for themselves, for Joan trembled still from head to foot, and felt as if she herself had been in some fearful peril; while Meliora astonished her by calling for brandy-and-water! She was deathly pale, and sat holding her hand to her side, when all had been done for Ruby, and the Warren- dales had gone to their own home.

"Do you really think it will do you good?" asked Joan, anxiously, as she took their small store of Cognac from the cupboard. Meliora had always abjured stimulants.

"Please give it me at once," was all the answer she received. And when she looked again at the almost livid countenance and the colourless lips, she made all the haste

she could to pour out the liquor into the glass. Never had Joan seen any person not absolutely swooning or dying look so ghastly. The stimulant soon did its work, however, and Meliora began to look more like herself; but she was "completely shaken," she averred, and would retire immediately to bed. And Ruby being fast asleep Joan helped her to undress, and sat by her afterwards, tenderly watching her return to her ordinary seeming.

"I never had any faith in brandy before," said Joan, as she insisted on a few remaining drops being taken. "You frightened me, Meliora, you looked so deathlike!"

"I dare say I did. Yes; brandy is a most valuable *medicine* under certain circumstances. If for no other reason, people should abstain from taking it frequently, or without urgent need."

"I did not know you ever took it."

"I have taken it occasionally for the last twelve months. What will you say, Joan, when I tell you that I have it always in my bedroom?"

"I shall say that you must have very sufficient cause for so doing. But, Meliora, you make me terribly anxious. What is the matter with you? And why have you concealed so long an ailment which must be serious?"

"It is only very lately that I have suspected the true nature of my malady. A year ago I first felt a curious faintness steal over me at times, and I took quinine and other popular nostrums for want of tone, general debility, &c., and found that they did me little if any good. One day, in the beginning of last winter, I felt suddenly very ill after hurrying upstairs, when that child Ellen Soames screamed so fearfully because a spider was in her bed. Mrs. Bray gave me some brandy, and I was soon all right again, and I told her to say nothing about my attack, which puzzled me exceedingly, for it certainly was not ordinary faintness, rather a sort of heart-sinking, as if the citadel of life itself were threatened."

"Oh, my darling! why did you not tell me? I would never have let you toil in the schoolroom as you have done all the half-year."

"Well! I felt sure that the attack was one of two things. Either it was a vapourish, nervous affection,

which needed only a little treatment to overcome it, or it was—the beginning of the end."

"Meliora!"

"The faintness, or whatever it is, did not recur for several weeks, but it came again and again when I was so knocked down by influenza. And then I told our good doctor all about it. He looked rather grave, but said it was only what is called 'weak action of the heart,' that it was a troublesome affection, but far from uncommon, that many people suffered from it, and yet died at a good old age. His father, he told me, had attacks very similar to mine for the last thirty years of his life, but succumbed to acute bronchitis at the age of seventy-five. It was he who told me to take brandy, and ever since I have always kept it within reach."

"And it always does its work as it has done now?"

"Always. But, Joan, when people have to take brandy, even in homœopathic doses, in order to keep themselves alive, there must be most serious mischief at work."

"There must, indeed! But do you suppose you would die if you took no brandy?"

"I think it is very probable. It is not faintness exactly, but an awful, deathly sensation that seizes me. My blood seems to stagnate, my heart to swell, and then stand still; I lose my sight, and, to some extent, my hearing. I have just power enough left, when the seizure comes on, to fly to the remedy."

"Does it ever come on without a cause?"

"It has done so once or twice of late—not since we came here. Fatigue induces it, and anything like worry. Dr. Parker told me that I must always 'avoid a shock.'"

"How ridiculous! As if a shock could be a shock if it were possible to foresee and avoid it."

"I was never to hurry upstairs, he said; never to put myself in the way of excitement; above all things, never to run, or even hasten, to catch a train or omnibus."

"That is more rational. One *can* go slowly upstairs; one *can* make up one's mind to miss a train; but a shock cannot be avoided. As this evening for instance. Oh, my Ruby! Thank God! the darling is quite safe. To my life's end I shall thank God for her deliverance, and

next to him I shall thank Mr. Arthur Warrendale. But for him what anguish must have fallen upon us! How bitter must have been our grief! Nay, I dare not think of it!"

"We are spared the dreadful trial thanks to our God and Father, who, though He permitted the extremity, sent with it prompt and full deliverance. But it was a narrow escape."

"Mrs. Dawes has been telling me that cattle have been lost in those curious inland quicksands, and that once two men who were fishing for pike were drowned there. It is only a certain space in the middle and towards the end, where the lake is broadest, that is unfathomable. That white marly stuff, of which part of the shore is composed, is nothing more, she says, than millions of infinitesimal shells that crumble at a touch. The peaty banks of the lake on the fell-side are perfectly safe. People about here use the calcareous substance, or whatever it is, for hearthstone, our landlady tells me; they whiten their floors, too, and their doorsteps with it, and her husband once limewashed a shed with a quantity of it dissolved in water, she says. *Meliora*, you are ill again!"

"No, I am not; I always feel shaky and silly for some time after the attacks. I shall be all right in the morning, I hope."

"You cannot be all right with a tendency to such seizures. You shall have the best advice London can furnish as soon as ever we are at home again. But why do you say that you have only lately discovered the true nature of the illness, when Dr. Parker told you what it was some months ago?"

"I said 'suspected,' Joan dear. And yet I am almost sure it is not a mere affection, but an actual disease of the heart. My grandmother died of something of the same kind. It is not a very lingering malady."

"I will not believe that it is anything more than weakness and the result of overwork. Now I shall leave you, for it cannot be good for you to talk so much; you ought to be fast asleep as well as Ruby. Bless my darling! who that saw her glowing cheek and her calm brow,

and listened to her soft, regular breathing, would think she had just been snatched from the arms of death ! Good-night, dearest Meliora ; I shall look in when I come up to bed presently, but I shall not disturb you."

Joan went down to the comfortable parlour, where she had been so happy and light-hearted, and there was a nice little supper spread on the table ; but she could not eat, although to satisfy kind Mrs. Dawes she took something on her plate. She was thankful when her landlady quitted the room, and relieved her from the necessity of keeping up appearances. Then she laid down her knife and fork, left the table, and sinking on the sofa covered her face with her hands, and gave way to a succession of tearless sobs that exhausted her far more than the veriest fit of actual weeping.

Bitterly she reproached herself that she had not long ago satisfied herself as to the cause of Meliora's failing health. "Who can tell what a day may bring forth?" she mused, when at last she became calmer. "Who could have dreamt the events of *this* day ! Of the issues of our pleasant excursion ! And this morning—this afternoon ? I was so tranquilly, peacefully happy ! We seemed to be sailing in the smoothest waters, gliding down the placid stream with scarce an effort of our own, and not the remotest threatening of the storm that was really gathering around us. One moment all serene, the next the horror—the terrible anguish—to be followed by a still deeper and more abiding pain. Oh ! my God, I thank Thee that Thou hast preserved my darling child, that Thou hast given her back to the arms that would have been so empty without her ; and—spare me the great sorrow that I inly dread. Take not away my friend—my mother, who has given me second life. Heal her sickness, whatever it may be, for Thou art the Great Physician, whose skill can never fail ; who canst bring back to our common life those who reach the very borders of the deathly stream ; who canst, if Thou wilt, restore *the dead* ! Let me, I pray Thee, keep my Meliora, my best, beloved friend."

And then there was a brief silence in Joan's heart ; her head was bowed, her hands were clasped, her lips were

closely compressed; she was evidently passing through some mighty struggle. It ended at length, and the dark eyes were raised; there was a faint glow on the cheek that had been so pale; the fingers were quietly folded together, and she softly murmured, "Nevertheless, not my will, oh Father, but Thine be done. Take what Thou wilt, for all Thy will is love; only leave me not! Be with me in the hour of tribulation, and keep me from distrusting Thee. Give me strength according to my day! Give me the comfort which Thou alone canst give—the peace which Thou alone impartest."

And then Joan went upstairs to find those who were so precious to her sleeping sweetly. Ruby lay buried in profoundest slumber, her lovely little face resting like a half-closed rose upon the pillow. Meliora slept, too, perhaps as soundly, but there was no glow of health on her sunken cheeks, and Joan noted with pain the extreme thinness of her fingers as they lay on the bed-clothes. She remembered that only a month ago she had said to her, "You wear no rings now, Meliora?" and the answer had been, "They are all too large for me, my dear, so I have shut them up in my treasure-box!"

Argendale would make all right again, Joan had fondly hoped; she saw the roses blooming every day more healthfully on Ruby's childish face; she had felt her own strength renewed, her whole self recruited, and she doubted not that Meliora would also find fresh vigour and life during the quiet breathing-time they enjoyed together. How could she have been so blind? How could she have dreamt the pleasant dream so long? As she gazed on the sleeper she saw on her countenance what she had not noted before—the ravages of disease, not the mere fading of a temporary malady.

Wearied as she was that night, it was long before Joan slept. Once she was sinking into unconsciousness, and suddenly she thought herself standing on the shores of the mysterious lake; the ground was crumbling away beneath her feet, and the dark waters rolled around her. She awoke with a start, to find herself safe in Mrs. Dawes' blue-and-white check-curtained bed, and to listen to Ruby's gentle breathing, also to recall that supreme moment when

she caught sight of the dripping little figure in her young deliverer's arms. There was no more sleep for her till long after the sunbeams had flooded with golden light the high grey cliffs of Warston Crag, till the birds had almost done their earliest matin-song, till men were hastening to their daily toil along the steep white road that wound across the upland-heath, towards the base of fir-crowned Earnseat Knot, till the new summer morning in all its beauty and fragrance shone forth triumphantly over sea and land.

Ruby awoke a little tired, perhaps, but certainly none the worse for her perilous bath; she scarcely realised, Joan thought, what might have been her fate. Nevertheless, she said to her sister, as they were kneeling down together, as usual, before leaving their chamber, "Joanie dear, I should like to tell God how much I thank Him for what He did for me yesterday; for though Arthur got me out of the water, God must have sent him to the exact place just then, must He not?"

"Most certainly God sent Arthur to save you, my own darling."

"I thought He did! I might have been drowned, might I not?"

"You *must* have been, my Ruby! you must have sunk into the deep, cold waters, and left this world for ever, if Arthur had not come to your aid. No one else could have saved you, for no one else could swim. I might have died with you, but I could not have saved you, dear. How was it you ventured into such danger?"

"I hardly know; but I thought I could get Meliora some of the lilies she wanted. I suppose it was wrong of me to steal away as I did, without telling anybody; but at the moment I did not think of it; I only thought of the water-lilies, and of how pleased Meliora would be when I gave her a fine cluster of them. They were not so easy to pluck as I imagined; I fancied I had but to stand on the shore, and stretch out my hand; I saw one lovely flower, though, and one big white bud, quite close to the land—the white chalky land, you know, that sinks and lets one in! I never thought worse would happen than that I should get wet feet and very dirty boots, as I do some-

times in the muddy lanes at home, and as I have often done here on the beach when the tide is going out. So I stepped on to the white, soft stuff, and in I went, ever so deep, and I was all wet in a minute. It was difficult, too, to get out of the holes my feet made, and something seemed to be sucking me in so fast! I made a plunge, and got out somehow; and then, before I knew it, I felt the real water going over me. I was so confused and surprised that I had scarcely time to be frightened, and just as I began to be afraid I heard a shout, and before I could think what it meant, Arthur had hold of me, and I knew that I was safe. I was not *under* the water quite as long as I am when I take a good dip in bathing, but lake-water is very much colder than sea-water, I can tell you! And that is all about it. Now, Joan, won't you say the words for me?"

When Ruby's little thanksgiving was over, she remarked, "Yes! I shall always remember how good God was to me at Argendale, and I shall always—*always*, love dear Arthur Warrendale for what he did for me. But for him I should be lying now at the bottom of that awful lake, only it has no bottom! I wonder where I should have gone to—my body, I mean, when my soul had flown out of it!"

All that day Meliora was very tired and drowsy, and she yielded instantly to Joan's desire that she should remain in bed till the afternoon. But after tea she seemed quite herself again; Ruby went for a drive with Mrs. Warrendale, and Joan and Meliora strolled out through the wood, which formed a part of the grounds belonging to the farm, along a shady green lane, between ancient walls of loose grey stone, all mantled with velvety moss, rich-tinted lichen, and plummy tufts of fern, to an open heath above the cliffs, commanding a glorious prospect over sea and land. Among the silvery grey slabs and boulders of fretted stone, with the wild bracken all about them, and the grave-faced horned sheep feeding peacefully close at hand, they sat them down to rest.

What a calm, lovely evening it was! Before them stretched the blue expanse of the great bay, that seemed at last to melt into the distant horizon. Like a vision, far

away above the rippling, golden waves, rose the castle immortalised by Wordsworth's

Light that never was on sea or land,
The consecration and the poet's dream.

The northern shore was already bronzed in the ruddy sunset beams; the Old Man, and the great lake mountains beyond, towered grandly against a cloudless sky, and showed so plainly that they seemed almost within a walking distance.

"What a glorious sight!" cried Joan, as she seated herself comfortably against a convenient smooth boulder. "I could never have imagined anything half so beautiful."

"And yet it will be wet to-morrow."

"How do you know?"

"By the appearance of the mountains. When they seem so close and large, and are so clearly defined, a peculiar state of the atmosphere is indicated, which I never knew to be followed by any weather but the worst and wildest. See! the very rifts and scars in the Old Man are distinctly visible, and a stranger to the topography of the district might imagine that it was only a mile or so away. Those great Pikes, too! I can almost see the fissures in their bulky sides."

"I can see them perfectly. Yes! and even what I suppose to be the course of a mountain-stream, though it looks from here like a long streak of wet shining rock."

"Well! you never see the distant landscape so but rain, generally a deluge, follows within a few hours. I should not wonder if this should be our farewell view of all the mountains beyond Earnseat Knot; and even his hoary brow will be veiled in heavy clouds and impenetrable mists for hours, when once the downpour has set in."

"I hope you are wrong! I have grown to love those glorious 'everlasting hills,' and I should be so sorry to think this was my parting glance."

"Nevertheless, the parting glance must have come in three days, even had the fine weather continued till the hour of our leaving Argendale. Good-byes must be spoken, Joan."

"Yes, this is a world of farewells!" And Joan's eyes were full of tears as she gazed across the shining sea, and the wavy line of purple fells to the solemn heights beyond, thinking of the ancient words, "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills whence cometh my help."

"This has been a sweet, blessed time, my Joan," said Meliora, presently; "a season of happy rest. Come what may, you will always have these weeks to look back upon as a golden memory. I am so very glad we came here."

"And so am I. The rest, the breathing-time, *must* have done you good, Meliora."

"Yes; they have done me a great deal of good, I am sure. Till last night I have felt so much better and stronger in myself."

"And that temporary weakness was purely the result of that fearful shock. Why, I have been feeling ill myself, more or less, all day. Dear little Ruby fared better than either of us, except that she has looked rather weary and overdone since our early dinner. I do not believe she is one whit the worse for her terrible experience. I dare say, if that adventure had not occurred, you would have had no attack at all."

"Perhaps not."

"But you think you would? Meliora, don't get into a morbid way of expecting the seizures; it must be so bad for you."

"I do not think I am *morbid*, dear. This complaint, remember, is not on the nerves, it is quite unlike ordinary faintness or hysteria, which are, undoubtedly, aggravated by dwelling upon them. Joan, we had better look the future in the face."

"Not yet! not yet! Besides, we know nothing definite; and you say, yourself, Dr. Parker told you that, with ordinary precautions, there was very little to apprehend. What is to prevent you living to seventy-five, like his father, and dying of something else, after all? Such a terrible fright as we had last night will not probably recur. Pray God it may not! The more I realise what might have been, the more I gasp and shudder."

"I am not convinced that Dr. Parker understands my case, or that, understanding it, he spoke to me candidly."

"You shall have the first advice in London, directly we get home, and whether you like it or not, I mean you to have holiday all next half-year. You shall lie on the sofa, and read your favourite authors; perhaps now and then when I am very hard pushed I may allow you to correct an exercise or two. And perhaps you may, if you are very good and obedient, be sometimes permitted to take a reading and sewing class."

"I will do as you wish, Joan. It is my duty, I suppose, to give myself every chance. But I tell you it is of no use; it is only a question of time."

"It is a question of time with us all. We are one and all under sentence of death, and the warrant may be issued to-day—to-morrow—next month—years hence!"

"Just so, and it does not matter, if only when the Lord call, He find us ready and waiting. I never could join in that clause of the Litany, in which we pray to be delivered from 'sudden death.'"

"Nor I, either. I always say 'unprepared death' instead, though I don't know that I quite like that phrase, for one's whole life should be preparation for the great change, so that when the summons comes we may have nothing to do but answer, 'Yea, dear Lord,' and go to Him."

"Just as a tired, loving child drops his playthings when he hears his mother calling him, and runs to her, longing for her tender arms."

"After all, *Meliora*, what we call death is the crown of earthly life, and I—I do not quite believe in death for those who go. It is they who remain behind who taste the bitterness of death."

"Do you know, Joan, I used to dread death? Not with a cowardly fear, but with a certain mortal shrinking—with a tremor, as I thought of the dark, unknown way my feet would have to tread—with sadness at the thought of parting from familiar friends and scenes, but now——"

"Now?"

"Now that fear, that shrinking is taken quite away. I only ask to be spared till the work God wills me to do be done to the best of my ability. Then, whenever He calls, I am, I trust, ready and willing. For there is

service beyond the grave, and I feel sure God will give me work to do for Him, in that other world to which I go, higher and nobler than any I have ever done or can do for Him here."

And then they sat silently, hand in hand, watching the sun go down behind the purple Bekanks Fells, while the shadows of evening gathered over the lovely landscape that they might never see again. It was almost dark in the wood as they passed through it, but when they came out on the little bit of heather-land before their own door they saw that the rich, soft crimson radiance still lingered on the mountain-tops, and the distant sea was glowing yet "as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire!"

"At evening-time it shall be light," said Meliora, grasping Joan's hand, as they went into the house.

Next morning Meliora's forecast of the weather was fulfilled. They were awoke by the dashing of the rain against their windows, and by the howling of the wind. Nor did the clouds clear away till the very morning of their departure; so they saw the hills no more. Only once they caught a passing glimpse of misty peaks, as the train bore them swiftly from their beloved mountain-land. That evening they were once more at Chestnut House.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FRANK'S AFFAIRS.

"Happy the wooing that's not long a-doing."

AFTER all, it was generally agreed that Meliora was "the better for her change." Joan had wonderfully improved; and as for Ruby, spite of her terrible cold bath, she came back, as everybody declared, the very picture of health! Mr. Carisbroke was certainly better than he had been

since the commencement of his illness, and Maggie and Brenda returned from their respective visits in excellent health and spirits, the latter becoming every day more capable and womanly. All seemed refreshed and invigorated for the campaign of the coming half-year.

Three more days and Chestnut House again resounded with the merriment of young voices. The pupils mustered strongly on the opening-day, and before the close of the week there were assembled under the care of the Misses Carisbroke fifteen boarders and five-and-thirty day scholars. At Meliora's request, Joan said nothing of the great trouble that was pressing upon her own heart, and both Maggie and Brenda wondered that she did not evince more decided satisfaction with the increased prosperity of the school.

The doctor whom Joan wished to consult was out of town when she and Meliora returned from Argendale, and several engagements which could not be postponed prevented the early consultation which she had planned, so that it was already September when at length the eminent Dr. Cordis saw his patient.

It was on a Saturday that the two ladies by appointment visited the celebrated physician, who was just then at the height of his popularity as regarded cardiac diseases, concerning which his *dicta* was supposed to be as utterances of an oracle—infallible. His great treatise on "Auscultation" had recently been published, and was immensely applauded by the critics of his own profession, and it was well known that he was still arduously engaged in a certain work, the result of many years of careful investigation and experience. All the medical world looked forward to Dr. Cordis's forthcoming "Cardi-*phonia*."

It is not too much to say that in the first few moments of the interview he read Meliora's fate, as in an open book. A few questions, a very slight examination, told him the exact nature of the fatal disease under which his patient laboured, and he knew that he was powerless to arrest its silent, swift advance.

"This complaint generally ends fatally, I believe?" said Meliora,

"Generally," was his grave, quiet response. He might have answered "inevitably"; but that, of course, it was not expedient, under the circumstances, to reply. He did not know Meliora, though he guessed her to be no ordinary woman. He could not be sure but that the sudden revelation of her certain doom would be the signal for the last throb, for the final pang, for the dread moment of dissolution. Meliora, however, continued, "Yes! I know all about it, for it is a family complaint. I do not come to you for a cure, which I know to be impossible; I only want to know if there is anything to be done, anything that *ought* to be done?"

"Very little; as much quiet as possible, plenty of fresh air, and good food—and, do you take stimulant?"

"I never have taken it, except as medicine, on an emergency."

"Good! Then now you must take it; if you had taken it regularly, it would be of little avail at the present. A teaspoonful, in your case, will be more efficacious than a copious draught in some others I could name. Drink claret, the best you can procure, with your dinner; reserve brandy for special occasions, such as sudden faintness or spasm."

"I understand. Have you any further instructions?"

"Only that you preserve for at least sixteen hours out of the twenty-four a recumbent position; that you dismiss from your mind all possible care and anxiety; that you avoid quick movements, and going up and down stairs more than is absolutely necessary. A strict attention to the laws of health is also to be recommended. And I will write you out a prescription which I have proved to be of great value in several instances."

"Thank you. I quite agree with all you say. And now will you tell me candidly how long it may last?"

"My dear madam, I could not possibly say. With great care—*great care*—I have known the crisis warded off for years. I must confess, though, that a little imprudence might produce the most alarming results. The issue depends very much upon yourself and upon your friends."

"That I fully comprehend. To a certain extent, my fate is in my own hands. I can, by the use of means,

retard or precipitate the end—for *awhile* ! But the day is not far distant when naught that I or my friends can do or leave undone will avail anything. What is the longest term of life that I may anticipate !”

“Pardon me, that is a question best left unanswered.”

“In many cases, I dare say it is ; in most cases it may be expedient not to excite the apprehensions of the patient ; but when I tell you that I have not a fear—not a shrinking from the close—that I feel certain I shall not die an hour sooner for knowing the expected hour, I think you may venture to speak to me very plainly.”

“It is well for all persons—even those in perfect health—to set their house in order, is it not ?”

“Most assuredly it is. And I believe I have done, and am doing, my best in that direction. But for several reasons I should be glad to have an idea how long a period remains to me, in all probability, here on earth.”

“Then I must tell you. I have never known this kind of malady last *longer* than five years.”

“So long ! I do not give myself two years !”

“I was dating from the manifestation of the first symptoms. You must have been cognisant of abnormal manifestations for many months ?”

“Yes ; it is already two years since I first suspected some kind of mischief ; it is scarcely one year since I had the first unmistakable attack.”

Dr. Cordis made no reply ; he took pen in hand, and slowly drew up the promised prescription. Joan felt as if relieved from something like suffocation when she stood once more with Meliora at the bottom of the doctor's imposing flight of steps ; her heart was beating more painfully than her friend's. She had hoped, in spite of all her misgivings, that the celebrated physician would dismiss most of her fears by pronouncing the case to be one of those ordinary heart affections so common in the present day, which rarely end fatally, and scarcely ever seem to shorten life.

It was almost in silence that they drove home, and Meliora felt that it was best for both not to make immediate reference to what had transpired during their interview with Dr. Cordis. No one but themselves knew any-

thing about the visit ; it was generally supposed at home that the ladies had simply gone to do the weekly round of necessary shopping. It would not therefore be incumbent upon either of them to enter into any kind of explanation, the more especially as they left an order with their regular stationer, and brought back a large parcel of working materials from the Berlin Depository. Only Mr. Carisbroke wondered when Joan said they had not had time to go to his publisher's in Paternoster Row !

All this while they saw very little of Frank. He chose to consider himself deeply offended that so little interest was manifested in his engagement. He remained crazily in love with his fair enchanter, but disliked certain members of her family more and more. He began to think that his only resource was an immediate marriage.

"It costs no more to keep two than to keep one," he said, jauntily, one day, when Mrs. Cook was discussing the vexed question of ways and means.

"Oh ! doesn't it ?" she exclaimed. "That's a delusion in which foolish young people are fond of indulging. Still, I must say, I don't hold with long engagements ; and I do think it is a pity as young men as hasn't got the means should trifle with the affections of confiding girls. I was very weak, Frank, and I'm afraid very foolish, in letting you come here a-courting my Ada. Now, Mr. Patterson, he's something like. He says at once, 'Be my wife, and name the day,' and he won't take no denial. It is not *his* fault that the wedding wasn't a month ago."

"I am sure, Mrs. Cook, I am quite as anxious to be married as Mr. Patterson can be, and if only Ada would give her consent, and be willing to begin in a humble sort of a way, the one wedding-day might serve for both. Shall it be so ?"

"I couldn't answer on the spur of the moment ; I must think it over and talk to Ada. It would save a lot of trouble and of expense, too, if we could make it a double wedding. They'd make a pretty pair of brides, would my Anna Matilda and my lovely Ada, though I say it, as shouldn't say, you know !"

Frank went away just a little puzzled. Up to this period Mrs. Cook had steadily set herself against a speedy mar-

riage of the impecunious pair, and had, on more than one occasion, severely snubbed the presumptuous young man who dared to suppose that wedded bliss was compatible with an income of £300 per annum. Now she seemed quite content, and even desirous, that the marriage should take place without delay. He knew nothing about certain passages between his intended mother-in-law and Uncle Ben. The latter, being applied to for "an advance," as it was commonly worded, replied promptly and to the point. He wrote:—

"MY DEAR SISTER COOK,—Am in receipt of yours of the 11th inst., and hope you are in better health than when you wrote your letter. Seems to me you are very often poorly now. Am afraid you don't take exercise enough. Would do you good, I fancy, to be a little more active in the house. My mother used to say scrubbing a floor or doing a day's washing was a better tonic than any doctor's stuff. And I am sure so much port-wine must do you harm; it tends to gout and apoplexy at your age.

"Now about the cash! I enclose £50 instead of £25, as at your request, and £20 for each of the girls who are contemplating holy matrimony, but I am afraid I can't be present at the wedding, because I am in for a little business of the same sort on my own account. In plain words, I am going to be married in about a fortnight's time to a lady of suitable age and of most excellent disposition. She and I fancied each other years ago, when we were both young; but I, from prudential motives, being what's called backward in coming forward, another stepped in, proposed, and won the day. I was a good bit chagrined at first, but wasn't so foolish as to break my heart, though I can't say I felt quite comfortable when I got a bit of Polly's wedding-cake, and heard the church bells clashing like mad on her marriage-day. 'But,' says I, 'it's of no use crying over spilt milk, and there's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.'

"Well, there was the end of it, or so it seemed. I saw no more of Polly for a dozen years, but a whisper reached

me that her husband was a downright waster and 'ne'er-do-weel,' and was coming down in the world very sadly. I was sorry for Polly, but then she shouldn't have been in such a hurry. She must have seen that I was only waiting a suitable opportunity to speak out. Then I heard she was a widow, with four children, and quite unprovided for, and very soon after she came back to the old neighbourhood, to be among her own friends. I expected to find her quite broken down; but no. There she was, almost as young and blooming as ever; and what pleased me most, having no silly pride, but putting her shoulder to the wheel, to maintain herself and her family.

"Well, it's no use beating about the bush. I thought I might as well have her now she was free, and I had never fancied any other woman between-whiles; so we made it up again, warmed up the old love, and agreed to get married as soon as she could decently go out of mourning; and that's all about it.

"But having a family of my own, you can't expect me to be any longer saddled with yours; so this is the last '*advance*' you will receive from me. Give Anna Matilda and Ada their £20 each, and tell them not to fool it away in finery, but to spend it in things useful, or, better still, put it away safe, against a rainy day. The £50 is instead of the £25 you asked for, *as a loan*! It is a free gift, and I no more expect its return than I do the repayment of the many '*loans*' you have had from me during the last few years. Only! quite understand, there is *no more to come*! It is full time I had a household and family of my own, if I am ever to have one, and I must say I am tired of providing for those whose ways don't in anywise please me, and who ought to do something on their own account, or else cut their coat according to their cloth, and make ends meet by dint of strict economy. So please expect no further '*loans*' nor '*advances*' from me: if you do expect them, you will be only disappointed, as I mean what I say, and am a man of my word.

"From all I hear, I should say Anna Matilda's young man is a very worthy and respectable party, and he'll do well by her. As for Ada's intended, I hope he is no fine

gentleman, but I can't say I like what I've heard of him. However, as the young people are fond of each other, they must marry, I suppose, and they ought to do so very nicely on £300 a year, which you say is his regular income, with a junior partnership in view. Tell Ada not to think too much of her pretty face, and not to spend her £20 in folly. I should strongly advise that the girls left at home should take respectable situations of some sort; and for yourself, sister Cook, don't make such a fuss about '*appearances*'; don't buy things you don't really want; and avoid debt. For now, you must make your own income suffice, and it will be of no use to appeal to me, as in the past, for even the smallest '*advance*!'

"Wishing you all prosperity, I remain your affectionate brother-in-law,

"BENJAMIN COOK.

"P.S.—Of course you will receive cards and wedding-cake."

I will not attempt to describe Mrs. Cook's disgust with this unexpected communication. For a little while she was furious; then she melted into tears, and bewailed the cruel wrongs of her poor, dear, fatherless *babes*, defrauded of their natural inheritance. She had always thought Uncle Ben was of a cruel, selfish, heartless disposition, and now she was sure of it! And what a fool he must be to be snared by Mrs. Polly, who had doubtless set traps for her old sweetheart from the very hour of her husband's demise! At his age, too! well over fifty, to take up with a crafty widow, and a ready-made family, to the injury of his own flesh and blood! It was simply disgusting!

"And I suppose he means what he says?" inquired Rosamond, tearfully.

"That he does! I've no more hope of any help from him than from the Emperor of Russia. What's to be done? We owe nearly every halfpenny of this £50; if I went out and paid every bill that is owing, there would not be a clear £5 left."

"Anyhow, we had better get out of debt," said Lucilla, timidly.

"I suppose we must pay something on account; but I say, what's to be done? We *can't* live on our own income without enduring all sorts of privations. What *is* to be done?"

"Indeed, I don't know," responded both the elder daughters, dismally.

"Some of you will have to turn out, after all, I am afraid; though I never thought to see girls of my poor, dear, blessed Daniel Nathaniel's working for their bread. We'll let Anna Matilda and Ada marry, though, and then see how things are with us."

"But Ada and Frank don't think of marrying yet awhile. You know you said you wouldn't give your consent till he had £500 a-year, or was a partner."

"Did I? I suppose I did! Well, circumstances alter cases. I thought then that Uncle Ben, if properly managed, might come down handsomely. But that's all over; not another shilling of his shall we ever see; we must curtail our expenses, whether we will or not, and the marriage of *two* daughters will be a good excuse for moving into a smaller and cheaper house. Richard Patterson's all right; he's mad at the wedding being put off till September, when he had set his mind on his being married in August. But Frank Carisbroke takes it very coolly; any time within the next two years will do for him. That won't do; as things are, I must have Ada off my hands as well as Anna Matilda. Ada is the most expensive of you all; there's no keeping her within bounds, and she has less management than any of you."

Which, indeed, was true, for Ada was more of a helpless fine lady than any of her sisters, and was wonderfully accomplished in the art of shifting from her own shoulders to those of others the burdens she did not wish to bear. She was famous for wearing out her clothes, for spoiling her finery, and for making the worst bargains possible; she had a distaste for any kind of needlework, an inaptitude for keeping even the simplest accounts, and a sublime contempt for the useful art of cookery. A charming wife, certainly, for a young man whose income was exactly £180, *not* £300 per annum! and who had no more hope of being taken into partnership by the firm

he served, than he had of being elected Lord Mayor of London.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Cook's suggestion was sorely tempting. Prudence, as you know, was never Frank Carisbroke's *forte*, and he really had been economical of late, and was a few pounds in pocket. It soon dawned upon him that he must either make sweet Ada his wife speedily or give her up, and the latter alternative was not to be thought of. Besides, it was high time that he was married, every reasonable person must be aware of it. Also, his dislike to Mrs. Cook began to grow into detestation, and he had to exercise an immense restraint over himself to avoid speaking his mind to her, and letting her know the small estimation in which he held her. Once Mrs. Carisbroke, Ada should see little or nothing of her own family, he was fully determined. The more he thought about it, the stronger grew his resolve to expedite his marriage, and remove his beloved one from the untoward influences of Lupin Villa. Not a word was said in his hearing on the subject of Uncle Ben's unwelcome tidings. So, on the very next evening, he asked Ada what she thought about a double wedding, and whether it would be possible for her to be ready on the 21st of September—the day on which Richard Patterson and Anna Matilda were to become man and wife.

Of course, Ada protested that it was much too soon, that she was not at all prepared for her new duties, that she didn't think she *could* make up her mind to leave dear mamma so hastily, that her *trousseau* could not be completed, and a great deal more to the same effect; all of which Frank, as might have been expected, very speedily overruled, Ada being quite prepared to be won over without more ado. Mrs. Cook had told her that retrenchments were necessary, and that she had better go to Frank at the same time as her sister went to Mr. Patterson. She must choose between an immediate marriage, or going out to give music lessons; and the young lady, without a moment's hesitation, decided in favour of the first alternative. She would be lowered for ever in her own estimation, and in that of many of her friends, if she were known as a "music teacher"; and besides, Anna Matilda

would not beat her in the matrimonial race, if the same hour saw them at the altar.

Anna Matilda was rather sulky when she found how events were likely to shape themselves; she had no mind to share her bridal honours with her sister—she wanted a wedding-day to herself, as she told her devoted Richard. But he saw no objection to the double marriage, and her mother and Ada being determined, she was compelled, however ungraciously, to submit; and all hands were set to work at the necessary preparations.

It mortified Ada, however, to see Anna Matilda triumphing in the display of sundry costly presents made to her by her lover and by members of his family. Never had Lupin Villa rejoiced in such bountiful supplies; hams, bacon, eggs, butter, cream, cheeses, were constantly arriving by the Parcels Delivery cart, and Richard himself very seldom arrived empty-handed. Even "the girl," as their one clumsy, inefficient servant was generally called, breakfasted and supped frequently on those delicious sausages known as "Patterson's own." Frank, on the other hand, contributed nothing better than cut flowers, or occasionally a plateful of shrimps—which Mrs. Cook invariably spoke of as "srimps," to Frank's intense disgust; or now and then a lobster, or perhaps a little inexpensive fruit. As to personal presents to his bride-elect, he could not, of course, attempt to cope with the buttermen, who was really at this epoch offensively liberal with his cash. Anna Matilda displayed rings, bracelets, brooches, and all sorts of trinkets, which she took care to explain were none of your Brummagen gilt-ware, but solid 18-carat gold, and real stones! She was afraid poor Frank had been sadly deceived in that pretty turquoise ring, it began to look so very much like imitation; and were not the turquoises getting of a very bad colour?

After some deliberation, he and Ada had come to the conclusion to commence life in apartments—furnished, of course, as the necessary funds for furnishing were not forthcoming, and there was some insurmountable difficulty in the way of the realisation of Ada's £100, payable by her father's will upon her marriage. She was to receive it in a few months' time upon attaining

the age of twenty-one. Anna Matilda was in the same predicament; but Richard Patterson declared he did not care a rap for the money just then; it might be paid down at any time when most convenient to Mrs. Cook. So small a sum was of no consequence to him; and if Anna Matilda could wait, he could; *his* wife, he hoped, would never be short of a sovereign; no—nor of a five-pound note!—a statement which, being repeated with unconcealed applause to Frank Carisbroke, filled him with huge disgust. What was Providence thinking of to cram a common tradesman's pockets so generously, and leave the coffers of a gentleman unplenished? Poor Frank! he had many humiliations to put up with at this time. He began to regret that he had ever allowed Mrs. Cook to suppose that his income was £300 a-year; the expectations founded on his imaginary position exposed him to continual dilemmas. Sometimes it was almost in his heart to wish that he had never been introduced to Mrs. Cook—or to her daughter Ada!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

"He that lacks time to mourn, lacks time to mend;
Eternity mourns that."

THE three grown-up Misses Carisbroke were formally invited to the double wedding. Maggie declined, on the plea of urgent business, but Joan and Brenda thought it only right that some of Frank's family should be present on the occasion. Joan, especially, argued that it was by no means expedient to lay the foundations of a deadly feud between themselves and their foolish little sister-in-law; and that she would resent the slight of their non-appearance on so important a festival, there could be but

little doubt. Ada was one of those supremely silly and tiresome people, who are always looking out for slights, and putting forth their claims to a certain amount of attention and respect.

Frank scarcely knew whether to be gratified or the reverse, when Joan told him that she and Brenda intended to accept Mrs. Cook's invitation. He had become by this time painfully alive to the deficiencies of his bride and her family, and he knew that all through the wedding breakfast he would be nervously apprehensive as to what might come next. If only Ada had been content to go quietly to church with him, in a plain white muslin dress, with her mother and one or two of her sisters, how thankful he would have been. But the future Mrs. Carisbroke was not one to be mulcted in the smallest of her bridal honours, and of that fact her bridegroom was well aware. So he could only resolve to bear it as best he might, and get Ada away from Lupin Villa as soon as possible.

He went up to Chestnut House on the evening before the wedding, and appeared to his sisters in anything but jubilant spirits. Meliora had given the young couple a very handsome timepiece for the mantel-shelf, and the four girls, including little Ruby, had presented all the household linen necessary for their modest *ménage* in "apartments"; and Ruby gloried in having hemmed nearly all the table-napkins with her own small fingers.

It was a dull, dreary evening, and grave autumn winds were slowly sweeping along the chestnut avenue, as Frank walked up to the house. The leaves, gorgeously tinted when the sun shone upon them, showed pale and limp in the damp evening air, and the palm-like fans, nipped by an early frost, strewed the greensward on either side the walk. Frank felt, he scarcely knew why, an unusual oppression in his spirits. The grey, low sky, the dank, fallen leaves, the humid turf, the fading, dying flowers hanging heavily earthwards, all seemed in harmony with his own subdued feelings, and for a moment he wished that the event of the morrow was not to be. He wished, too, as he had never wished before, that his own career had been far different from what it was; he thought of his

wasted opportunities, of his sinful past, of his foolish—worse than foolish—youth ; and, perhaps for the first time in all his eight-and-twenty years, he longed for a better, nobler path than that he had hitherto pursued. And he knew instinctively that Ada was not one who would help him to emerge from the slough into which he had fallen ; rather would she need his helping hand, and call for all his patience and forbearance in their journey together through life.

He found only Joan in the large parlour where they usually sat in the evening, and she was busily correcting “themes,” a pile of which lay before her : Meliora was sitting with Mr. Carisbroke in the library, and Brenda and Maggie were in the schoolroom.

“Well, Frank ?” was Joan’s smiling greeting, as she rose to receive his fraternal kiss, warmer, she thought, than it had been for many a day. “I did not expect you this evening ; how is it you are not at Lupin Villa ?”

“Oh, they did not want me. Ada said if I came she would be too busy to give me a word or a look ; they are turning the whole house upside down for to-morrow.”

“Indeed ! It is to be quite a grand affair, then ?”

“A very ridiculous affair, I am afraid. Mrs. Cook is always moaning over her straitened means. Something has happened to reduce her income lately, she says—but the expenses of to-morrow will swallow up a pretty tidy sum, I should say. The worst of it is, they are trying to do the thing in style, and don’t in the least know how. I am afraid we shall all look rather absurd. What are you and Brenda going to wear ?”

“Our grey silks, with a little fresh *ruching* ; they will look as good, or almost as good, as new. They are a trifle old-fashioned, perhaps, but that cannot be helped : we cannot afford new ones this year.”

“But the school prospers greatly, I thought.”

“It does, thank God ! We are nearly as full as we ought to be ; but our expenses have been rather heavy of late ; we have turned the little sitting-room into a good study for the elder girls, and we have had to invest in a pair of globes, as well as in a new piano. Besides,—with a fluctuating income as ours must be, it is only

prudent to lay by a little for rainy days. So you will have to put up with our unfashionable old silks, Frank."

"All right! I have no doubt you will look far better dressed than any one there. Such a lot of vulgarians! Mrs. Cook is going to wear a gown that looks like fire and brimstone, and Lucilla and Rosamond will prank themselves out in cheap sky-blue silks that rustle like paper, and pink gauze bonnets with all Covent Garden upon them. It will do them good to show them how quietly gentlewomen dress. Oh dear, Joan, I do hope I have not been and gone and done it!"

"What *do* you mean, Frank?"

"I hope I have not made a dreadful, fatal mistake, that will upset me for the rest of my natural life. You see, one must stick to one's wife through thick and thin; one is obliged to hold to her even though she be by no means a success!"

"Surely! 'For better, for worse.' They are very solemn vows you will take to-morrow, Frank dear."

"It's dreadfully like being offered up."

"You should not think of it in that light. Your wedding-day should be the happiest of your life."

"It won't be, with such lots of foolishness going on. Joan, I am afraid I have made an awful blunder!"

Joan laid down the netting she had taken up when Frank arrived, and looked grave and anxious. "Is that your real feeling, Frank? Do you regret the step you must take to-morrow? If so, would it not be better, at any cost, to retract?"

"It is too late for that. What would not be thought of me?"

"Never mind what people think. If you are sure you do not love Ada Cook with all your heart, you ought not to marry her. If I were on the eve of marriage, and found out that I had not my lover's dearest and truest affection, I should be thankful for the chance—for the Providence rather—that saved me from a loveless union. You would wrong Ada by breaking away from her at the last moment, for a man ought to know his own mind fully when he asks a girl to be his wife; but you would wrong her far more cruelly—at least, it seems so

to me—if you led her to the altar with any reluctance of spirit.”

“I do love Ada; I would not change her for any other girl I have ever seen. I mean to make her a good husband. But—well, I don’t know that I can explain myself—it would have been wiser in me to have abjured matrimony for a few years, and applied myself to getting on in life. I shall begin at such a disadvantage, you see.”

“You are not in debt again?”

“Not much. Nothing to speak of, indeed. But I was foolish enough to buy several trinkets for Ada, and so spent all the little money I had saved; and then came necessary expenses which could not be avoided, so I was obliged to borrow a few pounds, so as not to have empty pockets on our journey. We are only going to Tunbridge Wells—Patterson and his bride are off to Paris.”

“How much did you borrow?”

“Five-and-twenty pounds. It was very foolish of me to go in for jewellery, I know; but then Anna Matilda had so many costly ornaments, and poor Ada pouted, and said I was stingy, and she fell in love with a pretty bracelet as we were looking into the shop windows in Regent Street, and I did not like to seem unkind and mean—and what could I do but gratify her? One is not married every day of one’s life. I am sorry now, though. I did mean—steadfastly mean, to begin without debt; but—there it is!”

“O Frank, I am so sorry! Don’t you know that debts have been the curse and ruin of our family?”

“Ah, yes, but not such debts as mine.”

“The principle is the same. Frank, I have twenty-five pounds saved up, of my very own, and I will give them to you, if you will promise me, on your word as a Carisbroke, never to get into debt again.”

“You are a brick, Joan! I promise. Why, for the last six or eight months I have paid ready money for everything, and I have had a proper weekly bill with my landlady. And Ada must go without jewellery in future. I should not have dreamed of buying the bracelet—which is certainly a superfluity—but for that cad of a buttermilk, whose barbaric tastes lead him to load his bride with golden fetters, as if she were a second Zenobia.”

"I don't see what that could have to do with it; and, by the way, Frank, I am not at all sure but that we are already related to the butterman."

"Doubtless—through Adam."

"Somewhat nearer than that, I fancy."

"What in the world do you mean, Joan? I never heard of any Carisbrokes being in the provision line."

"Perhaps not; but the butterman is a Patterson."

"Well, what of that? Oh, I see! You mean that our mother was a Patterson; and so she was. But what of that? Pattersons are of all grades; the name is far from uncommon. I daresay we are remotely connected with Bishop Patterson."

"It must be very remotely, then. But papa is tolerably certain that you and Anna Matilda's husband are second or third cousins, for Richard Patterson, who lived in the Borough, and dealt in poultry, sausages, butter, &c., was really mamma's own first cousin, and there was a sort of acquaintance kept up between them for some years after you were born."

"Oh, nonsense! The idea is too ridiculous. Why, I have seen old Patterson, and he has not the least appearance of a gentleman. He wears good clothes, and he sports a real chronometer, but he looks like what he is, in spite of all—a tradesman—just a common tradesman!"

"He is respectable, is he not?"

"Oh, eminently so, I imagine, and I only wish I had his balance at the banker's. Still, one would not care to acknowledge him as a relation. Suppose your idea be a correct one, you would not go up to him and salute him as Cousin Patterson, would you?"

"Yes, I would. We both work for our living, and honestly. I daresay I am better educated, and have more refined ideas, but that is through the force of circumstances. At any rate, I should like Mr. Patterson, senior, to know that I am the daughter of Louisa Patterson."

"I do beg you will not enter into any explanations tomorrow, Joan. It is the one and only point on which I can crow over Richard Patterson; my father is a gentleman and a clergyman, and his is—a *butterman*! Ada envies Anna Matilda her wealth, but rejoices in connecting

herself with a really good old family. She would rather be the wife of the poorest gentleman, she says, than of the wealthiest shopkeeper."

"I hope she may not live to change her opinion! But, after all, Frank, what *is* a gentleman? It seems to me that the species may exist quite irrespectively of birth, trade, or profession. Our milkman, for instance, is a God-made gentleman; while the father of one of our best, that is to say, *most profitable*, pupils, who wishes to be very intimate here, is a veritable snob! He is the son of a military officer in high command, he moves in what is called good society, he has a handsome establishment, and plenty of money—but he is *not* a gentleman!"

"Joan, you certainly have peculiar ideas. Well, choose your own circle as you please, but I beg you not to introduce yourself to-morrow as a possible relation to old Richard Patterson. If you do, I shall lose caste for ever with Ada and all her family."

"I promise for to-morrow, as I should not like to do anything to mar your enjoyment of the day, but I do not promise for the future, mind."

"I will be content with your assurance for the present. And, Joan, I really mean to turn over a new leaf, and, as a married man, leave all my youthful follies behind me. It is quite time I did something with my life, isn't it?"

"Quite time. And God help you, Frank, to fulfil your best intentions! Oh! my dear brother, if you would only seek that Strength which alone can keep you strong and true in the hour of temptation, how happy I should be. I do believe our want of religion—although we were a clergyman's family—was at the root of all our troubles at Perrywood."

"Come now, Joan, we always had family prayers; and I remember quite well getting into awful trouble through reading novels on Sunday afternoon."

"Yes, we were outwardly decent, but we had no love of God in our hearts, we did not seek to live according to His will. No wonder we came to grief."

"My dear Joan, I dare say you are right, for I give you credit for being a remarkably sagacious young woman;

but don't expect the same kind of thing of me, for piety is not at all in my way. I think if I go to church regularly once a day—and Ada is very fond of church-going—and if I live a steady, sober life, and pay my way, and all that sort of thing, it is quite enough. I cannot be a hypocrite—I detest *cant*.”

“So do I, so does Meliora, and so does papa; but you must perceive how different he is from what he once was. I think papa's life is very beautiful now, a pattern for us all. How patiently he bears his cross! how hard he strives to do what he can! how anxious he is to be as little a burden upon those around him as is possible. Mrs. Bray says she never knew what pure religion was—what an earnest Christian life was like, till she was left alone with papa last midsummer, and she will always thank God for what she learnt then.”

“I know the *pater* is wonderfully altered—he has another spirit in him, no doubt. He is not at all the man he was as Rector of Perrywood; but then, we can't all have a paralytic stroke to take us off our legs, and leave us nothing but what the good folks call ‘the consolations of religion!’ Perhaps if I were laid on my back day after day, and knew for certain that I should never walk about again, I might grow ‘pious’—I don't know. And perhaps when I am as old as the governor, I may naturally turn my thoughts to religion. Of course, when life is near the close, one instinctively thinks of another world. But in youth surely one should enjoy oneself.”

“Frank, have you ever *really* enjoyed yourself? I do not mean for an hour, or for a day, but regularly—continuously? Have you ever been, deep down in your own heart, contented, and abidingly happy?”

“I say, old girl, what questions you do ask? That's a poser! Well, if I must give you a plain answer, I cannot say that I ever have! I have been sometimes uproariously happy, enjoying myself with all my body and soul; but it did not last. For one thing, a really enjoyable life is always expensive, and I always was horribly short of money,—and then,—well! there was always what one might call a reaction, and afterwards I felt dull, and miserable, and unsatisfied, as if my life were of no good to

me. And now and then I have been so horribly tired of the whole world, and of everything in it, that I do think I should not have minded much if somebody had knocked me on the head, or pitched me into the river! I feel a little like it to-night."

"I will tell you why! You have been drinking at all sorts of streams but the one that never fails you, or grows bitter to the taste. And until you do drink of that Water of Life, my poor Frank, you will always be athirst, always unsatisfied, always craving for you know not what."

"Joan, you speak very seriously. Suppose I never drink of that Water of Life."

"I will not suppose anything so dreadful. I am sure you will, though, for we all pray for you, continually. But I am afraid, if you persist in turning away from God, you will have to come to Him through bitter and sore trial. Those who will not heed His voice in the quiet, pleasant sunshine often are made to hear it in the storm that desolates their life for ever in this world—yet but too happy if they hear it so, rather than go on to the end hardening their hearts, and turning away from their Father's home."

"Joan, I will think of what you say; I will, indeed! And when one is going to be married, one really should take a turn. I mean to give up many of my bad habits—all of them if I can, and try to be a good husband, and a respectable member of society. I do want to get on in the world—I am really tired of being nobody. Perhaps you will be proud of me, after all!"

"I hope so. It must be delightful to be proud of one's brother—one's only brother. And now, will you not go and see Meliora and papa?"

"Yes, I will just say a word or two to them. I can see you are longing to get back to that pile of exercise books. How can you stick at it so contentedly? It must be as monotonous as office work."

"It tires one sometimes, but it is daily work, and has to be done. Yes, I want to finish these themes as soon as may be, or I shall have to sit up late, and that will not be a good preparation for to-morrow."

"I thought Meliora did a good deal of that sort of thing?"

"She *did*—too much, I am afraid. Her health has failed so sadly of late, that I am anxious for her to try perfect rest."

"I noticed she looked wretchedly ill the last time I saw her. But I should fancy she was not one to take much rest, she was always so distressingly energetic. Watching her for an hour or two always made me feel quite tired."

"She would not tire you now with her busy ways—she is glad to rest. Frank!"—and Joan's dark eyes filled with tears—"I am afraid—I am sure, Meliora's work is almost done."

"What do you mean? She is not really ill? Why don't you send for the doctor?"

"She has had the best advice in London, and it is useless."

"Good heavens, Joan! You don't mean she is likely to die?"

"I do not think she will be very much longer with us. I do not know what made me tell you to-night of all nights, but I felt as if I must speak to some one."

"Does she know it herself?"

"Quite well, but she wants no fuss made, so please do not take any notice of what I have said. Only now you will understand why I am taking so much work upon myself, and that I cannot possibly go out as you have wished me to do."

"I cannot believe it! Meliora *die*! I should have thought she would live to extreme old age, she has always seemed so exceedingly healthy."

"It is not always the ailing who go first."

"I declare I feel regularly knocked over! I don't know a person in the world I respect so much as Meliora, unless, indeed, it be yourself. I don't think I can go up and see her now."

But at that moment Meliora entered the room. She was that evening looking unusually well, for it had been one of her good days. She was painfully thin, and Frank thought he could almost see through her hand, so slender and transparent it seemed, as she sat leaning her cheek upon it while she talked to him, but she had quite a flush upon her face, and there was a lovely light shining in her eyes.

"I say," he said, presently, "here's Joan been making ever such a moan about you, as if you were all but *in articulo mortis*! And though you have lost flesh sadly, I never saw you looking better or handsomer than you do to-night! I tell you what it is, Meliora, you were never looking better than you are at this moment."

"Was I not? I have often *felt* very much better. But never mind me, or my looks. I heard you were here, Frank, and I came to wish you all happiness—all *true* happiness and joy. I shall think of you to-morrow, and pray that God will bless you and your pretty little Ada all through your life together."

"Thank you. But why would you not be with us? Is it too late, now?"

"For one thing, I am not invited; for another, I could not possibly come. I might mar your festivities, for I might be taken ill; any sort of excitement does me harm. Never mind, my best wishes will be with you, and you must bring your wife to see me, as soon as you come back from Tunbridge Wells."

"What is it ails you, Meliora? You are not in a consumption, are you? I should think cod-liver oil would be good for you."

"It is my heart that is affected, Frank, and nothing can remedy the evil. I can only keep alive by being very quiet. I have said nothing about it, except to Joan, until very lately. Now, somehow, I like to speak of it."

"And yet it must be dangerous."

"So dangerous that my life on earth may be ended any hour."

"It must be like living under sentence of death."

"We are all more or less under sentence of death. We have all to die, sooner or later, only I know that with myself it will be *sooner*. What does it matter if I have done the work God has for me to do here below? There is other and better work awaiting me in another life."

"You take it very quietly, Meliora."

"Why should I not? What is there to fear? I shall only go the way Christ went before me: the dark way is dark no longer, since *He* died. And, Frank, if I never see you again—for the end *may* be very near at hand, re-

member what I say to you to-night. There is no happiness out of God, no peace save in Christ the Lord. In Him is strength and safety, and eternal rest and joy. The sting of death is sin, but God has given us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord."

And then Meliora went slowly away, for these few words were all she had strength for, and she felt it her duty, for the sake of those around her, to guard herself from all approaches of weariness and excitement.

Frank was strangely awed and subdued; his weak, thoughtless nature was deeply stirred within him, and he, too, like the seer of old, felt inclined to exclaim, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" How many have echoed that cry who never pray that they may *live* the life of the righteous! How many would gladly share the crown, who will not bear the cross! How many would clutch the palm, who shrink rebelliously from the rod, who would fain stand idle all the day, yet receive the full reward of the faithful at eventide!

Frank never saw Meliora again.

And the next day the double wedding took place, and Joan and Brenda bore their part in the gay circle assembled at Lupin Villa. They were thankful when it all was over, and they were back again in their own busy, yet peaceful home. Now that Joan had seen the Cook family, and learnt of what spirit they really were, she felt far more compassion for Ada, and inwardly resolved to do for her all that she possibly could. But for one weak, irresolute, and self-pleasing as poor Frank Carisbroke, a more unsuitable wife could scarcely have been found!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

REST.

"For ever with the Lord :
Amen ! so let it be."

At last came the letter which had been so long looked for—the summons for Maggie to join her sister in her new Australian home ; and in October she sailed away to the Southern Hemisphere, leaving Joan and Brenda to the sole responsibility of the school, for every day, as it swiftly passed, left Meliora more and more unfit for the duties she had so long and earnestly fulfilled.

Maggie kept up bravely till her last evening at Chestnut House, and then she broke down, sobbing out, "Oh, how can I ever go away and leave you all? And I shall never see papa or Meliora again—never in this world!"

"No, never in this world, my child," responded Mr. Carisbroke, tenderly ; "but, Maggie dear, we may meet again beyond the grave. Neither Meliora nor myself will be much longer here—it does not matter, except to those who are left behind. Maggie, we must work while the day lasts, then will rest at eventide be sweet."

"You have worked hard, papa, of late years."

"Yes; thank God for the awakening that came late—though not too late. But I wasted my best years, I shirked the burden and heat of the noontide day. Whatever you do, Maggie, don't live for yourself alone; selfishness is the root of all sin; self-love and self-seeking slay many a soul, and bear bitter fruit in one's declining age."

"I am afraid I am very selfish, papa; I am leaving Joan and Brenda to do the work I feel to be so intolerably irksome, and yet, somehow, I cannot help it. The life of a schoolmistress has been forced upon me, and I hate it; I suppose we are not obliged to bind ourselves to the lot that comes to us, whether we will or not?"

"I suppose we are not. But it is a dangerous thing blindly and wilfully to choose one's own way, to struggle out of a path simply because it is not quite so smooth and

pleasant as might be wished. One should be very sure that one is not fighting against God's will in order to gratify one's own short-sighted inclination."

"I hope you do not think I am doing *very* wrong in going to Australia?"

"No, I should be very sorry to judge either action or motive of yours. I have no right to criticise my children's doings so long as they are not absolutely evil; I have failed utterly in a father's duties, I do not claim from any of you the deference to my judgment which might have been accorded me had I been the real head of my family. Only, my dear, let your life, whatever aspect it may bear, be for the glory of God. Let *His* work be done, and then you will hardly fail of doing your own successfully."

"I will try, papa. I am a great deal better than I used to be—at least, I think so. I mean that I am not now altogether indolent and selfish as I was in those old days, when I never did anything it did not please me to do. But oh! now the time is come, I wish I were not going quite away. You will write to me, will you not, papa?"

"Surely I will, my child. Perhaps across the sea we shall have closer and sweeter communion than we have enjoyed hitherto."

"It is too late now to retract—to hesitate."

"It is too late now; Lavinia awaits you at the other end of your journey. Whether your path is self-chosen or not, it certainly lies straight before you at this moment; it remains only to tread it patiently and trustfully to its close. God bless you, my dear daughter."

And then Maggie wandered disconsolately into the schoolroom, where the girls were preparing their lessons for next day, and she almost wondered at herself that she could so calmly look upon them for the last time. At that same hour on the following evening she would be far away on the bosom of the restless waters; she felt something like a deserter as she glanced round the familiar room, where her daily duty had lain so long,—where, perchance, it still lay, only that she had chosen other scenes and tasks for herself.

Presently the bell rang for prayers, and Maggie went with all the others into the library, where Mr. Carisbroke

presided. Her tears fell fast all through the singing of the hymn and the reading of the customary chapter, but when she knelt down she could scarcely restrain her sobs ; she would have given much just then to have stayed quietly on in her despised post at Chestnut House. Her father did not name her in his petitions, he did not dare to refer to her more nearly than to supplicate earnestly for those who should travel by land or water, that they might enjoy journeying mercies, and be safely brought to the haven where they would be. Altogether it was a trying service, and all those most deeply concerned were glad when it was over.

It had been arranged that all private adieux should be taken that evening, for the departure was to be very early next morning. Joan rather dreaded the effect of so much excitement on Meliora, and begged Maggie not to linger long at the final interview. But Meliora was sweetly and tranquilly calm, when it came to her turn to say good-bye. "Nothing now can trouble me very much," she said in answer to Joan's gentle warning not to fatigue herself. "I only say good-bye to Maggie a little earlier than I must have done had she stayed at home. Maggie, I wonder which of us will reach our destination first !"

"I almost envy you, Meliora. But I am a great coward ; I want the rest, yet dread the toil. I long for the prize, but shrink from the contest. I am a sad *fainéante*."

"Wake up, my dear, and resolve to be a *fainéante* no longer. Determine to live worthily the life that God has given you. He will give you strength. He will show you how to work for Him. And, Maggie, in His service there is full content, even the peace that passeth understanding."

"Meliora, when did you first begin to do your work, as in God's sight ?"

"It is many years since I vowed myself to God ; but it is not so long ago that I felt fully my dependence on Him. When I first came to live at Perrywood, I was quite too well satisfied with myself ; I prided myself on my own goodness, though at the time I was scarcely conscious of it. I only wonder I was not left to fall into grievous error. But God was very gracious to me, and guided me by a way that I knew not to a deeper humility,

and a higher knowledge of Himself. God has taught me many things. He has led me on as I best could bear it, and shown me how great a joy it is to have all one's fresh springs in Him; and now, I shall soon be with Him, in that land where there is no more sickness and pain."

"You have worked well, *Meliora*; you deserve the rest and the reward."

"No, I deserve nothing; that is, in myself. I used to wonder how you would all get on without me, and now I am laid aside like a broken vessel, and things go on just as well as ever. That tells me that my work here is done; God never takes away one labourer in the field till another is ready to fill his place. How infinite are *His* resources!"

"I want to ask you one thing, if I may. I think if you would tell me it might be of use to me some day."

"What is it?"

"Have you no fear of the great change that you believe will come so soon? Don't you cling still to the life you lead below?"

"I have no fear now, for God has taken away all the poor mortal dread and shrinking that once was in my heart. He has quieted my soul, and filled it with a great, deep peace, which no power on earth can disturb. A little while ago I was troubled to think that my course was so nearly finished; so I asked God to loosen the ties that bound me still to this world, and he heard and answered my prayer. There is no one dearer to me than Joan—even my own beloved sisters, Claudia and Maud, are not so close to me as she is,—for she is child and sister all in one!—but I am ready now to leave her for awhile. I can say, 'Lord, now, lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace!' The same God who gives strength for life, or what we call life, will give also strength in the prospect of death."

"Death seems sweet and beautiful to you, I do believe."

"It seems like *going home*. It seems to me that I am tired, and my Father gives me rest. It seems to me that I hear His voice calling and bidding me come to Him."

"I wish I may feel so when my time comes."

"You will if you fully trust Him. God never forsakes,

though sometimes we cannot see His face. Maggie, believe me, there is no true happiness out of Him; in life as in death we must cling to Him, or we are miserable and tempest-tossed. And now, dear, I must not keep you any longer; let us say 'Good-bye' for this time. Our next meeting will be beyond the grave."

Next morning, before the usual breakfast hour, Maggie was on her journey to the docks. Joan and Brenda went with her, and Frank arrived just as they were ready to leave. There were only a few more parting words, for the vessel was about to weigh anchor; their last adieux were spoken, their last embraces exchanged, and soon the good ship began to move away, and they could see only the white handkerchief that Maggie held aloft still fluttering in the breeze. Frank returned to his office, and Joan and Brenda went back to Hampstead. Thus the little band that had journeyed together from Perrywood was diminished by three. Ere long there would be another parting, and there would be another vacant place beside the family hearth.

The autumn deepened rapidly into winter, and when the cold weather set in, it became evident that Meliora could no longer leave her room. She struggled on for some days, and then she said, "Joan dear, I think I must stay upstairs now; the cold makes me so very weak. I shall only trouble you if I try to do more than I have strength for; but I can still correct exercises as I lie here."

"Nay, dear, I can do all there is to do. I would rather you did not tire yourself. I have plenty of time for my work, and Mademoiselle takes a good deal entirely off my hands."

"A little of the old work would be an amusement to me, and I should like to think I still could help you, though ever so poorly. It has always been my wish to die in harness. And I really can do a great deal, so long as I recline quietly in my comfortable chair."

"Very well; you shall have two or three of the first-class exercise-books to-morrow; and if I see you are none the worse for them, I may perhaps indulge you with a few more. Only promise me that you will lay them aside if you feel in the least wearied."

"I promise. But really I feel all the better for a little reading and writing. Meditation is sweet and wholesome, yet it is not good to be thinking continually. One is almost sure to think too much about oneself—a sadly unprofitable subject."

So Meliora had the exercise-books—Joan taking good care that she had only those that gave little trouble; and as the winter set in she seemed rather better and stronger, and certainly none the worse for a little useful occupation. Indeed, she was very seldom idle; the table at her side was generally covered with books and papers, her desk lay open, her work-basket always contained some small piece of useful or ornamental needlework, and her note-book was in pretty constant use. She rose tolerably early, for her nights were often sleepless, and she was glad to change her bed for the couch or easy-chair. Mrs. Bray helped her to dress, and placed within reach all she was likely to require, and then left her to a quiet yet oft-times busy morning. Joan, compulsorily absent from her friend by reason of her schoolroom duties, did not guess how much she frequently accomplished.

Ruby was very fond of being in Meliora's room, reading to her, and even reciting her lessons; but Meliora would never allow her to stay for any length of time in attendance; for, as she said to Joan, "It cannot be good for a child to remain too long in the atmosphere that suits an invalid; besides, it is not well that she should see too much of illness and decay. Let childhood be childhood, as free from care and depression as we can make it. People, with the best intentions, too often bind upon the shoulders of the very young, burdens which God Himself does not lay there. Let Ruby be with me when I am at my best, and for a short time only. I do not want her little heart saddened, nor her childish spirits depressed by too close an acquaintance with the sick-room."

But Meliora would never have saddened any one, so far as her own behaviour went. She never talked about her sickness; she never inflicted upon her weary listeners the chronicles of her sleepless nights; she never discoursed on the subject of her "symptoms," nor favoured her visitors with an account of her own sufferings. Her face

was nearly always bright and invariably calm, she talked cheerfully whenever she could talk at all; but sometimes she would send even Joan away, saying, "My dear, I cannot talk to-day; I feel ever so grumpy and frumpy, and I might be cross. I think I am better alone. I will let you know when I am in a meet mood."

But when she said this, all knew that she was suffering from nervous depression, and one or another would glide in on some pretence or other to be assured that she needed no attention, yet without disturbing her. Her "moods," as she called them, were always respected; they knew she would be glad to converse again as soon as the dark hour had passed—as pass it always did, to be followed invariably by increased cheerfulness.

And so the days passed on, and early in December Maud Clarke came to join the circle at Chestnut House, partly to nurse her sister, partly to aid Joan in the multifarious duties incidental to the approach of the Christmas holidays. Little Laura came with her mother, to Ruby's extreme delight. The half-year glided very happily to its conclusion, for the school had prospered greatly, the pupils were nearly all improved, and some of them were going to their homes unmistakably better for their sojourn with Joan and Brenda. There was much to encourage the young governesses in their work. Nor did Mr. Carisbroke fail to render thanks for the progress of the term; he had reason to know that his own instructions had been successful; at last he felt that God was blessing his limited ministry in his own home; and a little book which he had lately published had, as he well knew, spread far and wide the good seed it was now his joy and happiness to sow.

So the weeks glided by, every day, and almost every hour, bringing its allotted task. Brenda, invigorated by the presence of her friend Maud, was more industrious than ever, and developed continually new powers, such as her father and sisters had at one time deemed impossible for her. She would never be clever, nor what is called strong-minded, never fit to stand alone in a world of trial and temptation; but she became more and more reasonable, and less selfish. The spirit of true piety was

planted in her heart, leading her into the best kinds of knowledge, and imbuing her with pure and steadfast principles. Brenda Carisbroke was learning to live for others, and in her quiet, unassuming way she did "what she could," and was quietly happy. But now that Maggie was gone, she insisted that Joan, and not herself, should take rank as "Miss Carisbroke," and head of the establishment. It would please her better to be "Miss Brenda" only.

At last came the breaking-up day, and Meliora begged that there might be the usual schoolroom dance and supper on the last evening, and she even asked to be allowed to give away the prizes and certificates of merit accorded to some of her own pupils. She went for a few minutes into the room, where the happy girls were polking and quadrilling to their hearts' content, to the music of Joan and the French governess, whose fingers and patience seemed literally untirable. It was a pretty sight, the gay, young forms, the happy, smiling faces, the light, girlish figures, mostly robed in white and scarlet, tripping through the mazes of their most enjoyable dance, which involved no bitter heart-burnings and cruel jealousies, such as too often mar the festivities of older people. Frank had promised to be there, and to dance with every one of the young ladies; but at the last he failed to put in an appearance, and neither Joan nor Meliora were disappointed. He and Ada, however, had agreed to spend, without fail, their Christmas Day at Chestnut House.

The next evening all was still and peaceful; the great schoolroom, duly dismantled by Brenda, was in darkness; there was no more din of pianos, no shrill laughter of girlish voices, but a very happy circle was assembled in the library. For the first time for many weeks Meliora came downstairs; her visit to the schoolroom had done her so much good, she told every one; she felt quite herself, and, indeed, looked once more like the bright, animated Meliora of old. Mr. and Mrs. May had looked in, and agreed to join the Christmas dinner-party, as Meliora's leaving home, even for the shortest distance, was in no wise to be thought of. "Let us all be together once more, Claudia dear," she had said. "I do not think it will ever

be again ; and Maud and Laura are here. Your boys and girls might come, too, in the evening, and have a game and a dance in the schoolroom. Do let us have a good tableful on Christmas Day."

"Shall you dare to sit down yourself?"

"Oh! no; I must not do that. I shall dine as usual in my own sanctum, but I shall be in the drawing-room when dinner is over. It is so long since I have seen some of your children, Claudia; I want to play 'Aunt Meliora' again. Besides, don't tell any one, I have a lot of little presents for the occasion."

So Claudia and her husband promised for themselves and for their children; and the next day, and the next, Meliora occupied herself in some mysterious way, which resulted in a number of neatly-made-up paper parcels and little notes.

Christmas Day fell that year on Tuesday, and the Sunday before was so wild and snowy that no one but Maud Clarke and Brenda ventured across the Heath to church. Joan had a slight cold, and remained at home to read to Ruby and Laura. Mr. Carisbroke and Meliora had a long, quiet talk together, retracing with exceeding thankfulness the past year, and looking forward hopefully to that which was to come. "And you are so much better, Meliora," he continued, after having discussed with her certain plans for a science class he had long projected, "that I really begin to believe the doctors have been making a mistake all through. Of course you must never return to regular work, but I do not despair of seeing you go in and out among us—my Joan's chief counsellor and comfort—for many a year. I see no reason why you should not survive me, for something *tells* me my time is not far off."

Meliora shook her head, but made no reply.

"And people that have heart-complaint so seldom die of it," resumed Mr. Carisbroke; "they live to a good old age and succumb finally to something else. Do you not feel better in yourself?"

"I must say I do, the last week or two. I have felt so much stronger that I have been almost tempted to imprudence. But, Mr. Carisbroke, I know there is no real

amendment. Perhaps it is the last flash that so often lights up the dying fires of life."

"You ought, nevertheless, to give yourself every chance."

"I will, I do. But I feel sure—oh, so sure!—that all is nearly ended. And being God's will, I am more than content—I am very glad."

"Are you? That is rather more, I think, than I can say. I, too, am content to lie quietly in God's hands, but I cannot yet be *glad* to go."

"That is because the time is not yet come. We do not care about going to bed till our day's work is done, and we are really tired. Death comes as naturally and as easily as life, I am convinced, when the hour appointed strikes."

"And at evening-time there shall be light."

"Yes! the light that comes from the heavenly world itself, a faint but welcome vision of the glory soon to be revealed."

That evening, as it still snowed heavily, no one attempted to go out. Mr. Carisbroke at first read aloud, and then the whole party joined in singing their favourite hymns, Joan presiding at the harmonium. Presently the servants were summoned for a short service instead of the usual family prayers, and it was proposed that they should sing

"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide"

to the simple chant with which all present were familiar. Meliora's voice mingled with the others in the closing verses of the hymn; they heard her distinctly pronounce—

"Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee,
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."

A few words of prayer followed, and then the usual benediction. A great sense of peace and blessedness fell upon the little fireside congregation, and it was several minutes before they rose from their knees. When all had arisen, and the servants had left the room, Joan noticed that Meliora still bent forward in the same position, her arm resting on the elbow of the sofa, her hand shading her face—her usual attitude in prayer for some time past, as she had been forbidden to kneel.

Joan sprang forward with a terrible fear at her heart. One look was enough ; the last smile of peace still lingered on the calm face, but there was a mortal paleness on the sunken cheek—a grey shadow that told too surely of the passing of earthly life. Joan had never seen it before, but she recognised instinctively the presence of the Angel of Death.

Surrounded by her dearest friends, with the accents of prayer and praise still on her faltering lips, Meliora had passed away to join the Church above.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SHADOWS OF DEATH.

“Thou art among the deathless, I still here
Amid things mortal, in a land of graves,
A land o’er which the heavy-beating waves
Of changing time move on, a land where raves
The storm, which whoso braves,
Must have his anchor fixed
Firmly within the veil :
So let my anchor be ;
Such be my consolation and my hope !”

ALL that was left of Meliora they laid in the pleasant Highgate Cemetery. Mist and snow were over the northern heights on the day of her funeral, and all the world seemed shrouded in gloom as the mourners stood around the open grave, and listened to the voice which told that “God of His great mercy” had taken unto Himself “the soul of our dear sister here departed,” and that her body was committed to the ground, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Joan shed no tear when the coffin was lowered into the

earth, but she felt as if one life ended there where she stood, and another one from that hour commenced. She who had been friend, sister, mother, monitress all in one, had left her, and henceforth she must stand alone. Rightly had Meliora judged when she said it was time that Joan learned to use her own judgment, and to depend upon herself, for now there was no one to guide and teach her. There was her father, it was true, but he always shrank from any exercise of responsibility. In spite of all the improvement that had taken place in Mr. Carisbroke's character, he still needed that mental stamina without which a man does so little for himself and for others in the daily walks of life; it was partly the habit of long years, and partly the physical depression consequent on long infirmity, and nothing now would ever rouse him to the full exercise of powers so persistently disused and weakened by bodily malady and decay. And this Joan knew—she knew that she was now the real head of the family.

That evening she went into Meliora's room, and sat down determined to face her position. Meliora's will had just been read. She had left to Joan all that it was in her power to bequeath; but that was little indeed, for of late years she had added her income to the general fund, and the principal nearly all reverted, according to her late father's will, to her nephews and nieces, her own natural heirs. Then, several years before, she had lost a comparatively handsome sum through the failure of a firm with which the Martins had long been connected, so that the residue which remained for Joan was far less than had been anticipated.

Still, it was something, and every little is a help to a woman who has to depend upon her own exertions. Joan thankfully and gratefully accepted the small bequest; for not only was it welcome, but it was the pledge of her lost friend's affection, and the visible expression of her care and thought for herself. She seated herself in the chair she generally occupied in that room; opposite to her was the vacant couch that had borne the patient form so long; close by was the table on which had been placed for so many weeks the invalid's favourite books, her writing

materials, her flowers, and her work-basket ; it was difficult to believe that no more in that silent chamber would she take sweet counsel with her who had never failed her whatever were the need.

"It is of no use," said Joan to herself; "I must not—dare not give way to the sense of loss. Who is there but myself to take her place, and be in our midst what she has been? I should prove myself most unworthy of her teaching if now I shrank from all that is before me. I must work chiefly *alone*, there is no help for it; but then, how thankful I am that papa is able still to take some part with us, that Brenda is so much more of a companion, and that I have my darling child to love and cherish. Ah! God has been very good to me in sparing my dear friend to me so long. He gave and He has taken away; blessed be His holy name. Surely, He who has never failed me will not now desert me. He can and He will give me the strength and help I so greatly need. I shall not really stand alone, for He will be with me—more now, I trust, than ever."

The next day was Ruby's birthday, and Joan tried to be cheerful for the child's sake; but it cost her more than any one guessed to go about with a smile upon her face, and to take an interest in the amusements provided for the little girl. It was not till Ruby was safe in bed that she gave way to the extreme sense of depression that weighed upon her spirits, and wept long and bitterly. The tears were a relief, but the traces of them were apparent when she went as usual to sit with her father. He, too, was deeply saddened; the last day of the year always brought bitter memories to his mind, and now the season was invested with a double sorrow. He scarcely guessed till the blow came how much *Meliora* had been to him. It was a comfort when Joan, with her pale, grave countenance, came into the room.

"We are sadder than ever to-night, my dear," he said, as she seated herself by his couch. "I cannot yet realise the fact that she has gone from us for ever, but I miss her every hour as the day wears away, and I neither see her nor hear any tidings of her. Oh, Joan, what shall we do without her!"

"Indeed I do not know," she answered, melting again into tears. "I am afraid, papa, I am very rebellious. It is so hard to say truly, 'Thy will be done!' so hard to feel in my inmost heart that all indeed is well."

"All is well for her, Joan."

"Yes, I know that, and well for us, too, no doubt; for our Father does not chasten us for nought. And I hope—I believe—He who knows so well what human sorrow is will not be grieved that for a time we sink and tremble beneath the stroke. I was thinking, too, of this day seven years."

"And so was I. That, too, was a day of darkness—the beginning of many sorrows. Still, Joan, there was something gained, for it was then I first learned to know you, my child—that strange, sad midnight meeting of ours was a bond of union between us that has strengthened continually ever since."

"Yet I do not remember that we have ever spoken of it. I wondered sometimes if you had forgotten it."

"I could not forget it, any more than all that came afterwards, and changed our whole life—changed it so entirely that my recollections of Perrywood seem more like a dream than an actual living memory. And now, Joan, changes have come again."

"Yes, the saddest change of all! And more may come. But how faithless I am! Do I not put my trust in One who changes not? Why, then, should I shrink and be afraid? Oh, papa, what a difficult thing it is simply to accept God's will, and not to doubt His loving-kindness nor His wisdom! What a faithless spirit I must have to tremble so for fear of the shadowy future, when goodness and mercy have so far followed all my way!"

"My dear, I think you are inclined to write bitter things against yourself. Remember that like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him, for He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust."

"That is the only comfort. And *He* knows us as none other can. Yes, and He knows the way before us, for it is all 'ordered.' Ah, yes, let us rejoice in that, the way is *ordered*, whether it be through the cloud—or through the

sunshine. Papa, we will *try* to meet the new year cheerily."

And so the father and daughter sought to strengthen and console each other, and the days passed slowly and sadly away, till it was time for the pupils to return. Never had Joan so fully recognised the value of downright imperative work as she did in that wintry weather, when it was necessary that she should at once bestir herself, and devote every thought and energy to the duties of the hour. Many preparations for the half-year's campaign had been inevitably deferred, and now it was all bustle and speed in order to get things in readiness for the opening day. Joan toiled hard, and superintended every department, but felt all the while as if she were some one else performing the part of Miss Carisbroke receiving her pupils at Chestnut House.

The girls came back. Mrs. Bray, who had been away for a fortnight's holiday, and Mademoiselle returned; there was the usual rearrangement of the classes, and the consequent settling down to work, together with all the difficulties that are inseparable from the resumption of regular active duty after a period of relaxation. Joan thought the children were exceptionally troublesome in their slow return to necessary discipline, and their careless mirth and natural wild spirits jarred painfully upon her saddened mood. She had to take herself to task over and over again, and to remember that the girls could scarcely be expected to manifest a protracted sympathy, the newer pupils especially, who were either entire strangers to Meliora, or had had but little intercourse with her. Only a few, who had been in the house before the last Midsummer vacation, could possibly know aught of the trial that Meliora's death had been.

It was an unusually bitter winter, and fog and snow pervaded the northern heights of London with little intermission. Hard, black frosts, keen north-eastern blasts, chilling the very blood and marrow, prevailed during the first quarter of the year, and sorely tried all who were of delicate frame and constitution. In February one of the pupils, who had been at home for some family festivity, came back with a heavy influenza, which soon spread

through the house, and turned it for the nonce into a hospital. Joan, and one or two of the elder girls, alone escaped the malady. Brenda had quite a serious attack of illness, and Ruby was so much indisposed that she had to remain in bed for a full week. The servants one after the other sickened, and were slow to rally. Mrs. Bray was so very ill that it was found necessary to send her to her own friends for an entire rest; and, worst of all, about the same time Mr. Carisbroke began to display most alarming symptoms. Dr. Parker looked serious, and after one or two visits wished for another opinion. The physician who consulted with him only confirmed his apprehensions; there was every reason to anticipate a fresh attack.

Prompt remedies and great care, however, seemed to ward off the threatened evil, for a season, at least, and when April set in with sudden warmth and sunshine Mr. Carisbroke was undeniably better. Still he did not regain that which had been for so many years his normal state of health, the weakness and nervelessness which had frightened his daughters did not disappear, and though less of an actual invalid than during the severe weather, he was more helpless and feeble than he had been since that terrible seizure at Perrywood Rectory. And as the spring advanced more hopeful symptoms were not manifested.

The Easter holidays were a welcome breathing time, but the brief rest was too quickly over, and Joan began to feel that the burden and strain of sole responsibility were almost more than she could bear. Brenda did all she could, but she always shrank from assuming any kind of authority, except over the little ones who were her peculiar charge, and Mr. Carisbroke became more and more unequal to the duties it had so much pleased him to discharge. Joan soon found that his memory was failing him; he could not remember events that had happened but the day before; he asked the same questions over and over again, utterly oblivious of the answers he received. All his literary labours had to be laid aside; if he tried to write he became confused and irritable; if he read he generally fell asleep after the first half-page, and at last, in trying to exercise his function as family chaplain, to which he clung almost childishly, he broke down in trying to repeat the Lord's

Prayer, the familiar words of which faded utterly from his weary brain. He wept long and bitterly, saying mournfully, when he found himself alone with Joan, "It is all over: I shall never be of any use again. I shall be a dead weight upon your hands, my dear. I hope the Lord will soon take me to Himself; I am only a cumberer of the ground."

Joan tried to comfort him, and talked about the summer that was close at hand, and how he should be wheeled about in the sunshine, and sit under his favourite chestnut on warm days, and renew the strength that wintry days had wasted; but all in vain. Finally, she had to acknowledge the sad truth; he had sunk, or was rapidly sinking, into all the feebleness and infirmities of extreme senility. That icy winter and that long, bleak spring had added the weight of twenty years to his age. Though really not much over sixty he bowed beneath the trembling weakness and decay of fourscore; he had suddenly become a failing, fretful, almost childish old man.

And as the summer deepened there was no improvement, as had been fondly hoped. He was not much worse, perhaps, but still the wheel-chair which was wont to carry him along the shaded walks and across the verdant lawn stood idle in the hall; the Ilkley couch was less and less in use, and at last, when a few chilly days announced the advent of an early autumn, it became apparent that he would never more leave his bed. Joan and Brenda could not wish that life, with its impaired faculties, should be prolonged, and yet they dreaded the utter desolation that would be theirs when all was over.

For Frank, who should have been their natural protector, seldom visited Chestnut House. In spite of all he had said to the contrary, he had fallen completely under the influence and sway even of his wife's family. Ada had all the imperiousness of a frivolous nature, and she soon found out Frank's weakest points, and took advantage of them to bend him to her will. She cherished an ever-increasing dislike to her sisters-in-law, the "school-mistresses," as she invariably called them; nor was her affection towards her husband by any means augmented,

when she discovered to her extreme consternation that he and Richard Patterson were really, though distantly, related. She even accused him of having deceived her, assuring him with many tears and upbraidings that she would never have married him had she guessed that he was connected, ever so remotely, with tradespeople—vulgar shopkeepers, like the Pattersons! She might, she owned, have been induced to marry a tradesman who had plenty of money, and who would give her a handsome establishment quite away from the business; but to marry to straitened means, and be disappointed of pure patrician descent, was more than she could bear, or be expected to bear patiently! She would sooner have died than have married under so cruel a delusion, and exposed herself to Anna Matilda's taunts; that young lady finding herself most comfortably situated, and most hilariously happy with her devoted buttermilk, whose sole faults were that he disliked her mother, and insisted on calling his wife "Nancy."

During the spring and summer Ada's health was supposed to be delicate, and it pleased her to enact the rôle of invalid, and to tyrannise over Frank by means of constant faintness and hysteria. Especially, she was sure to be threatened with alarming symptoms if he ever expressed a desire to visit Chestnut House, and she managed to get her own way so far as to induce her husband to promise her not to have anything to do with his sisters, who she was quite sure hated and despised her, and were her covert enemies.

But one fine October day Frank did walk over to Hampstead Heath to impart the auspicious tidings of the birth of a son and heir. He was mightily proud of being a father, and could not control his desire personally to announce the event to his own family. He had not seen any of them for some months, and he was considerably startled at the change which had taken place in his father during the interval, and altogether shocked when he found that it was not at all easy to make the poor old gentleman understand what had taken place.

"I have come to congratulate you on the birth of a grandson, sir," said Frank, unnecessarily raising his voice,

as if Mr. Carisbroke were deaf,—“on the death—no! I mean the *birth* of your first grandson, father! Don’t you understand?” For his father regarded him stolidly and vacantly, and manifested no kind of interest in the news.

“Yes—yes,” responded Mr. Carisbroke, hesitatingly; “on the birth of a grandson! Who has got a grandson?”

“Why, *you* have, to be sure! Ada presented me with a fine boy this morning.”

“Oh! Ada presented you with a fine boy this morning. Who is Ada?”

“Good gracious, father! don’t you recollect? Why, Ada is my wife.”

“I did not know you had a wife, Frank! And so she has a little boy! I am sure I am very glad.”

“And mother and child are doing uncommonly well,” continued Frank, proud of his paternal honours, and desiring to continue the conversation. “The doctor says he never saw a finer child.”

“Oh, indeed! he never saw a finer child!”

“Quite a Carisbroke; like his father and his grandfather, though Mrs. Cook will have it he favours her family.”

“Oh, he favours her family!”

“No, no! I said he was a Carisbroke; and he is, too, and no mistake.”

“Yes, a Carisbroke, and no mistake.”

“Good heavens! Is he always like this?” cried Frank, turning to Joan, quite angrily. “He does nothing but repeat my words. Cannot he understand?”

“I am afraid not; this is one of his bad days. Please not to worry him now; it will be of no use, and will only make him worse. He will forget everything you say to him.”

Frank looked aghast. He was silent, and in a minute or two the invalid had relapsed into his usual drowsy state, and appeared to be unconscious of his presence.

“Has he been like this long?” asked Frank, in a loud whisper.

“He has not been himself since the early spring,” re-

plied Joan, drawing her brother away into another room. "I do not care to talk about him in his hearing, for sometimes he does understand, and remembers it afterwards. But I wrote to you several months ago, telling you what I—what we all apprehended."

"You feared he was breaking-up, but you gave me no idea of the real state of the case."

"I was too busy to write at length; I begged you to come and judge for yourself. Why did you not?"

"I could not. Ada has been very poorly and nervous all the summer. I was told I must on no account excite her, or I might do immediate mischief."

"But why should she be excited at your paying your own father a visit, and you his only son?"

"The truth is, she has taken a dislike to you all, especially to yourself, Joan; and it is your own fault, for you never tried to make friends with her. It always irritates her if I say anything about coming over here."

"I am sorry for it. I think we have endeavoured to treat her pleasantly and kindly whenever you have brought her here. It seems to me that your wife has quite a genius for taking offence; for imagining slights when none are intended; for misinterpreting one's simplest words, and one's very looks."

"I know you have been prejudiced against her from the very first, and the less you see of her the better."

"Very well," replied Joan, coldly; "if that is your feeling and hers, I should not certainly wish to exchange visits. But why you should estrange yourself from us is more than I can understand. Surely, if you do not care for your sisters, your father has some claim upon you."

"Oh, of course I will come and see him from time to time, though I dare say he would not miss me if I remained away entirely. It is my belief that he will not last long. I should say he will scarcely see the end of the year! Why should you cry about it? His life is no pleasure to himself, nor to any one; in such cases death is a merciful release."

"No doubt," said Joan, with a little indignation she could not suppress; "but *we* shall miss him dreadfully. He is all we have—Brenda and I and Ruby, now that

Lavinia and Maggie are at the other side of the world ; and you treat us as if we were aliens, rather than the closest of relations."

"No, I don't. There now, don't cry. I do wish women were not so preciously fond of the water-cart business ! I am sure, Joan, if at any time I can do anything—that is, anything in reason—for you, I shall be quite delighted to do it. It is most unlucky that Ada and you don't take to each other, for I should like you to see the little lad."

"I should very much like to see my nephew, since I cannot possibly see my nieces—Lavinia's two little girls. I can hardly realise that I am actually an aunt."

"Well, I will see what can be done. Perhaps Ada may consent to bring him over, as soon as she is about again, or you might come and have a cup of tea with her some evening. It would be so much more agreeable if you could be friends together."

"I have no objection to be friends. It rests entirely with your wife. If Ada would like to see me, I shall be very happy to pay her a visit as soon as may be convenient."

And Frank went away really regretting the estrangement that existed between his wife and his own family, and pretty well persuaded, in his own mind, that the fault lay entirely with the former. But when, a few days later, he ventured to suggest the probability of a visit from Joan and Brenda, he met with a complete rebuff. "I do not want to see them, and I won't see them !" said Ada, angrily. "They despise me and I despise them, and we should be sure to quarrel like cats if we came together."

"My sisters never quarrel like cats."

"Which is as much as to say your wife does. I have noticed that whenever those *schoolmistresses* are brought into question that you are always rude to me. And when you consider how abominably you deceived me about your family and about your income, I wonder that you dare speak to me of your sisters. Of course *they* knew how I was being taken in and done for ! Ma has said over and over again that she would never have consented to our marriage if she had known that you had only about half the income you pretended to have ; and I am sure nothing

would have dragged me to the altar if I had guessed that your mother came of a race of shopkeepers."

For shortly before the birth of her child, for whom she insisted on making extravagant preparations, Ada had discovered that Frank had *not*, as was commonly supposed, £300 a-year; and, worse still, that his vaunted expectations as regarded a junior partnership were altogether *in nubibus*.

So Joan waited in vain for an invitation to come and see the nephew she really longed to behold; but presently she forgot all about him in her deep anxiety for her father, who declined more and more rapidly as the days became shorter and colder.

At last Dr Parker warned her and Brenda that the end was very near, and then she wrote to Frank, simply telling him how matters were, and saying that if he wished to see his father in life again, he must not delay his visit.

But it so happened that the letter fell into Ada's hands, and knowing Joan's handwriting she flung it contemptuously aside. Two days elapsed before Frank found it, and then there was a scene of mutual reproach and re-crimination between the husband and wife. He made all the haste he could to Hampstead, but was just too late by half-a-day. When he reached Chestnut House all the blinds were down. Mr. Carisbroke had died that morning.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ARTHUR'S CONFESSION.

"But oh! for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!"

"COME and stay with us this summer, Joan; we are going back to our old home at Argendale."

The speaker was Mrs. Warrendale, now a widow, and ten years had elapsed since she and Joan first became acquaintances. They had seen very little of each other during the interval, for the Warrendales had been living abroad for some years, on account of Mr. Warrendale's health. They had gone in the first instance to the German baths, and finding the climate exactly suited to the invalid, had taken a furnished residence, at the same time letting their own house at Argendale for a lengthened period.

After awhile Minnie Warrendale married an English gentleman settled at Heidelberg, and soon afterwards Arthur entered with him into certain commercial enterprises which necessitated his constant presence in the neighbourhood. Mr. Warrendale purchased a charming little *schloss*, that would have been better designated *villa*, and chiefly employed his time in horticulture and amateur farming; his health improved, he went to England now and then, and sometimes he was accompanied by his wife and son, but the home of the Warrendales for some years was in Germany.

Then Mr. Warrendale's health once more declined, and after a short illness he died; about the same time the term for which the Argendale house and park had been let expired, and Arthur, now master of Dunham Tower, decided at once to return to his native country, live on his own inheritance, and lead the life of a country English gentleman. Business was all very well while there were no ancestral acres to farm, and no tenants to deal with,—for his father had left the estate in charge of an agent, who chiefly distinguished himself by enacting the part of the

unjust steward,—but as soon as there were real home duties to attend to, Arthur Warrendale began to arrange for a dissolution of partnership with his brother-in-law, and to prepare for his prompt return to England. He had never married, much to the dissatisfaction of his parents, especially to the discontent of his father, who had greatly wished to see an heir of the third generation before he died.

Mrs. Warrendale and Arthur took up their abode at Dunham Tower in the late autumn, and remained there during the whole winter, going no further afield than Kenburgh or Lunechester; but when the spring arrived, they both felt the need of a little more society than was to be found in the neighbourhood of Argendale, and, accordingly, came up to town directly after Easter, with the intention of remaining till about Midsummer.

One bright morning, early in June, Arthur Warrendale said to his mother, "Have you made that call on Miss Carisbroke yet?"

"I am ashamed to say I have not," was the answer. "All last week I was going to Hampstead, but something continually interposed to hinder me; there seemed quite a fate against the visit."

"Can you not go this morning?"

"Certainly I can. Will you accompany me?"

"No; I think not. You had better go alone; it is so very long since we had any intercourse with the Carisbrokes."

"Do you wish to renew the intimacy, Arthur?"

"I do, if you have no objection, mother. I have often thought of Joan Carisbroke, and recalled the pleasant hours we spent together at Argendale—seven—eight?—*how many years ago?*"

"Ten! Time flies so fast; why, that pretty little Ruby that you saved from drowning must be almost a young woman."

"So she must. Somehow, I always think of her as the radiant little fairy she was so long ago. But you have seen her since those days, have you not, mother?"

"Only once. I called at Chestnut House each time I was in England with your dear father; but it so happened

that Miss Ruby was generally from home. I always saw Joan, and enjoyed an hour's chat with her."

"Dear me; she must be close upon thirty now! She was just a little older than myself, I remember. How well I recollect that afternoon by Little Hayeswater, when we talked Tennyson and Longfellow and Southey and the rest, and discoursed with that ancient man who told us how the bells rang at the bottom of the tarn, and warned us that evil would come of our sitting there! How did Joan look when you saw her last?"

"She looked very well, Arthur. I told you she would develop into a really handsome woman, and I was right. She was not exactly beautiful, perhaps, but I thought her one of the most graceful and stately women I had ever seen, and most distinguished-looking. If I had met her in the park, or coming out of a West-end shop, I should have expected to see her step into a carriage with a coronet on the panel. I wonder she has not married."

"And so do I! I don't know, though; she is just the sort of woman, I should say, to ripen late. Not one to be easily impressed; certainly not one to give her affection unadvisedly. It will not be any kind of man who will suit Joan Carisbroke; she will never marry, probably, unless she find a soul precisely in harmony with her own."

"Or unless the soul in question find her! Women, my dear Arthur, have not nearly the same power of selection as men. That is one reason, doubtless, why there are so many old maids. Man can choose at will, woman has simply the privilege of acceptance or refusal. After all, I am not surprised that Joan Carisbroke is still unwedded."

"You think she has loved, found no response, and so resolved to go on her way in single blessedness?"

"My dear Arthur, I think nothing about it. Since we parted so long ago at Argendale, I have seen Miss Carisbroke three times only. The first time we talked of nothing but her father, and her dear friend Miss Martin, whom she had lost; the second time she wanted to know my impressions of German life! the third and last time—just four years ago—we were chiefly occupied with that most pregnant question—the higher education of women.

She never said one word that could enlighten me as to her own private history. Only I think it improbable that she should have reached so mature an age without some image being imprinted on her heart. But, Arthur, why are you so deeply interested in Miss Carisbroke ? ”

“ I hardly know. I have not, as you may suppose, forgotten her. I have secretly compared with her several other women for whom I have at one time or the other entertained a transient liking, and always ended by finding them vastly inferior to my old friend. But so widely separated, and so completely engrossed as I have been in various ways, I never gave my thoughts very deeply to her or to any other young lady.”

“ And now ? ”

“ Now I think it is time that I should marry ! But I will not marry for mere marrying’s sake. I will wed a woman to whom I can give my whole heart, and whose life shall naturally blend with mine, or I will remain as I am. I can well believe that there is no half-way house in matrimony—either one must be really and truly happy, or the reverse. To some characters it must certainly be so. There are men, doubtless, who may be content to plod on through life at a dead-level of tolerance, liking well enough, but not loving, and simply esteeming the partner of their life as the mistress of their house or the mother of their children—the latter a strong and most sacred bond, I am sure ; but I must confess it would not suffice for me. My wife, though honoured as the mistress of my family, and revered as the mother of my children, must be something more to me, in herself, than either of these.”

“ And that ‘ more ’ you think you would find in Joan Carisbroke ? ”

“ How can I tell ? I have not seen her since we were boy and girl. I was exactly nineteen and a-half when I first met her ; she, I believe, was twenty or thereabouts. What does a lad of nineteen know of what he really wants in the way of a wife, a helpmeet, a life-companion ? Joan seemed to me then very charming, and I greatly enjoyed her society. I think if I had been much longer with her, it would have been certainly a case of calf-love, if nothing more serious.”

"Why did you not tell me?"

"I had nothing really to tell, and I had promised my father, as you know, not to enter into any engagement of marriage till my university career was fairly completed. He did not think then that my curriculum would be concluded at Bonn; he thought simply of my graduating at Cambridge, as he and my grandfather had done before me. Then it happened that I entered into those business relations with Minnie's husband, rather against your inclination, I confess, but greatly now to my own contentment; for I learned much in that Heidelberg counting-house that will be of use to me all my life, and make me, I trust, a better landlord and a far more practical country gentleman than I should have been had I devoted those years merely to foreign travel, or to the ordinary pursuits of young men in my position. The image of Joan, I must allow, faded gradually from my remembrance. I gave my mind absorbingly to the business on which I had entered, and if I thought of marriage at all, it was to resolve that I would for the next few years, if possible, remain an unpledged bachelor, nor seek to make any choice among the young ladies with whom I consorted. At seven-and-twenty I said, I will seek a wife, provided one has not already taken possession of my affections. Meanwhile, I will, to the best of my ability, master all the intricacies of the commerce in which I am engaged. You know, mother, you very early taught me the value of the precept, 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.'"

"A more valuable rule for this world you could not find! And it must be a good one for the next world, also, for he who best does his duty here must be most thoroughly prepared for the higher and nobler duties that await him hereafter."

"Yes, it was the servants who *doubled* the talents entrusted to them, whom our Lord Himself commended. But, to continue my story. About two years ago I began to think seriously of marriage, and Minnie, I am sure, purposely threw in my way her pretty friend, Fräulein Amalia—a sweet little thing was the Fräulein, but not quite to my taste; and, in short, I had determined not to

take back to Dunham Tower a German wife. Then Caroline Palmer appeared upon the scene, beautiful, witty, and accomplished! and for awhile I was captivated. As we became more familiar, I naturally saw more of her real nature, and I found that she had a violent temper, over which she had little or no control. Indeed, her unmistakable want of self-control was the chief blemish in her character; and I have always found that lack of self-control, especially in a woman, involves a most dangerous amount of self-love and self-will."

"I often wondered why your friendship with the Palmers cooled so suddenly. But I was not sorry; I had heard some whispers of Lina's temper, and I saw for myself that she was a *coquette*!"

"The latter fact I suspected afterwards. Well, mother, as the vision of Caroline, in all her brilliance, faded in my heart, I reverted to the memory of Joan Carisbroke, as I had known her years before. I saw her as I had seen her then—modest, dignified, deep-thoughted,—fair to look upon, and evidently of strong and warm affections; pure-minded, tender, and *true*—the very sort of woman who had been my ideal—though unconsciously so, for all the years of my manhood."

"I wonder you never spoke before, for, as a rule, you do tell me your secrets, Arthur."

"I should have said something to you,—I was going to ask you to invite Joan to Heidelberg, when my father's health again became enfeebled, and all our anxieties were centered in him. Then he died, and both you and I, mother, had no thoughts to give to anything beyond his grave. When reaction did set in, and I began to return to common life once more, there was much to attend to. There was our German household to break up, my partnership to dissolve with Minnie's husband; our home affairs to settle, besides accustoming myself to my new duties as master of Dunham Tower. And all this has brought me to the present hour. Everything is now in order, all imperative duties are completed, and I am my own man."

"And you wish to marry Joan Carisbroke?"

"I dare not say so much as that. I cannot possibly be

sure that the judgment of nine-and-twenty will ratify the judgment of nineteen ! I simply wish at present to resume the intimacy, and that can be done most easily, and most properly, through yourself, Mrs. Warrendale."

"Of course it can. And seeing that I very much approve of Joan Carisbroke, I am quite willing to accept the *rôle* assigned me. But let me quite understand you, my dear,—I am simply to take measures for the renewal of the former intimacy?"

"Simply that; all the rest shall be—ought to be, my own affair. A few days'—perhaps even a few hours'—close intercourse with Joan will tell me whether we are indeed the complement to each other that husband and wife should be. Distance may 'lend enchantment to the view' in appreciation of character, as well as in landscapes ! Besides, the Joan of ten years ago may be a very different person from the Joan of the present day. I am sure the Arthur of that period is not the Arthur that now stands before you ! Joan's needs, mental and spiritual, may be—as my own are—far otherwise than they were when we discussed the poets by the Unfathomable Lake. Her tastes may be altered or supplemented, her character may have developed in a manner so diverse from mine, that now they could never flow on in one harmonious stream. I want to know Joan as she is, and I want her to know me as I am now."

"I understand. I must go and court Joan a little on my own account, and bring about, somehow, a renewal of the old terms."

"Joan was always very fond of you, mother."

"Was she ? I think she liked me well enough, but her friend Meliora was all in all to her in those days. I am not sure that any one or anything would have tempted her to marry if Meliora Martin had lived."

"Her devotion as a friend only enhances her value in my eyes. A woman of such steadfast affections is a prize worth securing."

And so it came to pass that Mrs. Warrendale found herself that afternoon at Chestnut House, and inviting Joan to spend her Midsummer vacation at Argendale.

Joan's eyes brightened at the idea. She had never again

been to Argendale, though every summer as it came brought with it the sweet, sad memory of the happy days spent there with Ruby and Meliora. At first, she thought she could never bear to visit the place again, for every lovely spot would be haunted ground—every rock and hill and mossy glen and shady nook would remind her of the pleasant communings that could never be on earth again. She would see the slight form for ever by her side; the sweet, serious eyes would be upon her wherever her feet trod. She would hear the voice she so loved in every murmur of the waves, and in every cadence of the wind. She felt that she could not bear it. All present joy would be lost in one great irrepressible yearning for the past, for—

The days that are no more!

But Joan was of too sound and strong a nature thus morbidly to nurse her grief. As time passed on, and the great consoler softened the anguish of bereavement, she began to feel again that she was young and ardent, and that life really was before her. Still, something always intervened which prevented the half-formed intention of revisiting Argendale from being carried into execution. For several years Joan and Ruby went with Brenda to a favourite resort of Maude Clarke's. Once business took her to Paris; once the Mays bore her and Ruby away in triumph for a Highland tour. So it came to pass that something like a glow of happiness suffused Joan's cheek, when Mrs. Warrendale asked her so cordially to be one of their family circle that summer at Dunham Tower.

"I must think," she said, "whether it can be. I hope it can! I believe it can; but I must be sure. I was half inclined to stay quietly at Chestnut House by myself, for Brenda and Maude are off to Guernsey, and I have just consented that Ruby shall accompany them, for not far from St. Brelade is the home of her intimate friend, Agnes Macdonald."

"And you had no thought of going with them?"

"No; for I dread the possibility of a sea-voyage. I am a very poor sailor; the crossing from Dover to Calais is about as much as I can make up my mind to. Brenda and Ruby would not mind the overland route, I am per-

suaded. Lavinia and Maggie both enjoyed their outward journey, and were scarcely indisposed after the first day or two. I am the unlucky one of the family. I do honestly believe I should never land alive in Australia if I attempted the passage."

"Lavinia and Maggie! Those are your sisters in Australia, are they not?"

"Yes; Mrs. Mander and Mrs. Balston. Lavinia has seven children, and Maggie five. They seem quite at home at the Antipodes, though Lavinia, I think, sometimes longs for a look at the old country. Her marriage, though a very fair one in a pecuniary point of view, has not been a very happy one, I am afraid. Maggie, I am glad to say, seems thoroughly content, quite wrapped up in the best of husbands, and in the most marvellous of little ones. Mr. Balston and I have corresponded, and I like his letters very much."

"Brenda is now your only unmarried sister, except Ruby, is she not?"

"The only one, and she is really Miss Carisbroke, for she is a year and a-half older than myself, but she persists in taking the position of a junior."

"And little Ruby is not so very little now, I suppose?"

"She is not very tall, but she is very pretty—at least, I think so. I thought her a beauty when she was a dark-skinned, meagre baby, whom everybody else called *ugly*. But she is still quite a child, and I am glad of it. I am in no hurry for her to grow into a woman. I hope she will be a happy, joyous child—a merry girl, for several years yet to come."

"How old is she?"

"She was sixteen on the 31st of last December."

"Some girls of that age feel themselves quite grown-up. My only sister was married at seventeen."

"Ah! I hope I shall keep my Ruby a few years longer, all to myself. I do not think very early marriages are for the happiness of women."

"Nor I either. But we will discuss the subject fully at Dunham Tower. What I want now is your consent to the plan."

"It tempts me more than I can describe."

"Then yield to the temptation! Choose your own time; we will make our arrangements to suit yours. Only let us know as soon as you possibly can the earliest day you can fix for leaving home."

Joan did not hesitate long. And, indeed, there seemed no reason why she should not accept the invitation. Brenda and Ruby, when they heard of it, were delighted. It was the only thing that spoiled their own programme, they averred, the prospect of leaving Joan alone at Hampstead. Since she could not go with them, the next best thing was that she should be enjoying herself with the Warrendales.

"Mammie dear," said Ruby—it was her pet name now for Joan, when they were quite alone together—"it is just the one thing I could have wished for to complete my own happiness. I should always have been worrying about you if I had had to leave you here, solitary in this great empty house. Even having Agnes all to myself for six weeks, in her own beautiful island-home, would not have made up for the dissatisfied feeling I should have had thinking of you all forlorn at Hampstead. I am so very glad you are going! I wonder how Arthur Warrendale looks now, and I wonder if you will go to Hayeswater! Dear me! Arthur must be quite elderly by this time!"

"He is rather younger than I am, Ruby."

"No older? I suppose people of twenty or thereabouts do seem almost venerable to young folks of six or seven, such as I was then. Tell him, Mammie, that I have never forgotten what he did for me!"

And so it came to pass that once more Joan found herself bound for Argendale. She met her friends at Euston terminus—for they were to travel by the London and North-Western Railway—and once more she saw Arthur Warrendale, with whom she had talked so pleasantly in the days that were gone; and she thought how very little in some respects he had altered. He looked older, of course; all traces of the boy were gone. He was a fine, well-developed man, with regular features, a bronzed complexion, and an unusual quantity of beard and whiskers, giving him, Joan thought, rather a foreign appearance.

They were soon on the old footing again, talking

familiarly on every topic as it suggested itself, and enjoying their journey to the full. But Joan grew silent as the hills began to rise on the horizon, and still more so when at last they saw softly looming through the afternoon haze the hoary head of Earnseat Knot. It was high tide, and the smooth waves lapped the very rails as the train glided by familiar, well-remembered scenes. The wide bay glittered in the sunshine; the far-off mountains showed through a veil of blue, transparent mist. All was as it had been when first Joan beheld the beautiful landscape, which had never faded from her memory; and yet all seemed changed, so much had passed since last she had seen cloud and mountain melt away in the far distance, with Meliora at her side.

"Ah, Meliora!" she said to herself, when, left alone in her chamber that evening, she stood at the open window, watching the sunset light upon the grey hills and cliff, and on the golden sands of the great estuary, "you are gone, and the world is just as fair! Yonder sea is as blue and sparkling, the hills are as purple in the summer twilight, and the woods are as leafy as of old. Now I understand the force of those words that I once thought so weak and sentimental—

"Break! break! break!

At the foot of thy crags, oh sea;
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LOST IN THE WOOD.

"'Tis life whereof our nerves are scant,
Oh life, not death, for which we pant;
More life, and fuller, that I want."

BUT soon the sadness faded from Joan's mind. Meliora was not less tenderly remembered, yet Mrs. Warrendale and her son were more fully appreciated; the Past was not forgotten, but the Present began to have strong interests of its own, that would in their turn supply kindly associations for the future. The Warrendales were not offended at the evidently pensive mood of their visitor; they liked her all the better for her fidelity, and quite understood how great was the strain upon her feelings at thus revisiting, after so long an interval, the scenes to which Meliora had first introduced her, and which brought back so vividly to her recollection the memory of her beloved friend.

Soon, however, she became the bright, though serious Joan whom Arthur so well remembered, and she thoroughly enjoyed the beautiful country around her, as well as the congenial society of the Warrendales. One by one, old haunts were revisited, and by degrees Joan began to associate with them the friends who were still at her side, as well as those who would tread the flowery greensward of Argendale with her nevermore. The place became dearer than before, and ere long she began to dread the day when once again she would bid adieu to the beautiful land that must always be to her one of the most cherished spots on earth.

Arthur and she took many rambles together, for Mrs. Warrendale was no longer a good pedestrian, and preferred a quiet drive on level ground, or even a *siesta* at home, to the rural expeditions which she had once enjoyed quite as much as the younger folk. She did her best sometimes, when it seemed her duty, to play propriety, for Joan's sake, but she generally left them very much to each

other's society, pleading her own inability to encounter any kind of fatigue. She would sit still in the carriage while they climbed the hill, or botanised upon the heath; she would find, or Arthur would find for her, a comfortable seat whilst he and Joan explored the wood, or visited the waterfall, or got bogged, perchance, upon the treacherous mountain side. "For I am not so young as I was, you see, my dears," was her constant apology.

One beautiful evening, after an unusually hot day, Joan and Arthur set out for a long walk. It was still so warm that but for the welcome sea-breeze they would hardly have ventured beyond the park. As it was, they were glad to turn aside from the open fell-side, on which the sun's rays still lingered rather glaringly, into a little wood that offered most opportunely its pleasant shade. Once beneath the sheltering boughs, how sweet and fragrant it was! The golden light flickered through the gently waving canopy of leafage on to the emerald and crimson moss below; delicate ferns nestled about the gnarled roots of the old trees; fair wild-flowers enamelled the verdant sward; the wood-pigeons cooed softly in the branches; and now and then through the interlacing foliage gleamed the beautiful blue sky, or, at wider openings, the still deeper azure of the glittering sea.

"This *is* perfect," said Joan, drawing a long breath, when all suddenly they came to a little clearing, from which they looked down upon the rocky valley, the long line of grey cliffs, all bronzed and glowing in the rich western beam; the vast shore, with its salt pools of sparkling waters and its radiant, amber sands, and beyond all, the great bay itself, encompassed by its low green fells and purpling heights behind, save where the sea-line and the sky-line melted into one, beneath a heaven of loveliest, fairest sapphire, mingled with sunset gold.

"I think it is," was Arthur's reply. "Do you know, Joan, I have been half over Europe. I have seen the German and Italian Alps, the Grands Mulets, and Mont Blanc from Chamouni, the green hills of the Abruzzi, the craggy defiles of the Appenines, and, of course, the whole 'castled Rhine'; but I deliberately aver that in my eyes — perhaps too partial — no scene on earth is fairer and

sweeter than those we find on such a summer eve as this in our own fair 'north-countree'!"

"I have seen so little of the beauties of the Continent; but I think I can be quite content with those that lie about me here. Argendale has always seemed to me one of the bonniest spots the world can hold. And, oh, how sweet and fresh the air is! Mr. Warrendale, I sometimes wonder how you could stay away so long from your own beautiful home—your ancestral inheritance!"

"And so do I, now that I am comfortably back again. But it was not exactly a matter of choice, you know; the climate did not suit my father's complaint, and that of Heidelberg did. As soon as ever—deeply to my regret—I became master of Dunham Tower, my heart began to yearn for it; and no sooner were the last duties paid to my dear father than I took steps for the settlement of my affairs in Germany, and our return to our own Fellshire."

"You were born here, I suppose?"

"Yes, in the Tower itself; that is, in the original building, not in the more modern mansion which we generally inhabit. There is a sort of superstition in favour of one of the old chambers, as a birthplace for the Warrendales; and I believe my father was the first—for several generations at least—to die elsewhere. It has always been esteemed a prerogative of our family to be born and to die in what we call the Tower Chamber."

"It may not be very difficult to arrange as to the births, but who shall say when and where he shall die! I think if I were a Warrendale born, I would try to break through the spell. I would die anywhere rather than in the Tower Chamber; though, after all, it does not matter."

"Not in the least. It is only the male Warrendales, however, who are expected to demise according to rule. I shall certainly make no effort to comply with the family requirement. Even if my last illness overtake me at Dunham Tower, I shall eschew the fatal room, simply because it is the most uncomfortable in the house. I am no friend to old customs, unless they be founded on sense and reason. It was all very well for the sons of a family to be born and to die in the self-same spot in the old humdrum time of the first three Georges, or even

earlier still, for no one then thought it incumbent on him to travel for at least three months in every year; to go continually from Dan to Beersheba—having started in the first place from England or France—to run the risks of Alpine *crevasses* and avalanches; to go down into mines and up into balloons; to cross the Atlantic annually, or to undertake amateur Arctic expeditions.”

“My Aunt Jane used to sing an old song, purporting to be the sentiments of an ancient lady, who was greatly troubled in her mind on account of the advance of the times. I remember but one verse—

“‘I mind me when a little girl,
I travelled once to York,
And slow and stately did we ride,
It was a four days’ work.’”

“And now we can go from London to York in about as many hours! Shall we ever travel by balloon, I wonder!”

“Perhaps! Or by electricity! It does not become one now to laugh at the wildest conjectures where science is at all concerned. Who would have thought when Franklin first discovered electricity, that the result would be the electric telegraph—the great cable between England and America! that the crude observations of James Watt and his forerunners on steam should reveal at last the mighty power that not only speeds the traveller on his way, but sets in motion the most complex machinery. But, Mr. Warrendale, is it not possible to press forward too eagerly, to live too fast, to regard irreverently the spirit of the past?”

“I think it is; I am quite sure it is. There is always a danger in such an age as this—nay, in all ages—of a too intense self-gratulation, an utter self-complacency, which may lead to rashness and to folly. We cannot afford to despise the Past, for we owe to it all the advancement of the Present; we are ‘the heirs of all the ages’; therefore, to the bygone centuries, in which the light gleamed but faintly through the darkness, is our reverence and respect fully due. We can but live up to our lights!”

“And our lights will doubtless be accounted dim and

uncertain in the ages yet to come. It is quite possible that two or three generations hence we, of this nineteenth century, may be *pitied* for our narrowness, and stupidity, and crass ignorance ! Let us not be too high-minded."

"Man's motto is one ever-increasing and prevailing '*Excelsior* !'

"All the years invent ;
Each month is various to present
The world with some development."

"And '*Excelsior*' is a good motto?"

"A good and holy one, I *think*, and one that is according to the will of the Lord. Progression, I am convinced, is a Divine law ; it is, in fact, a universal law of Nature. There is no such thing as standing still, either literally or metaphorically. If one does not progress, one *must* retrograde. Everything under the sun improves—or it deteriorates. One cannot be on the 31st of December as one was last New Year's Eve !"

"And yet I have heard persons boast of being 'always the same'—and further still, of being as their fathers were before them."

"I do not believe any creature—except, perhaps, an oyster—could be 'always the same' ; and even that would grow fatter or leaner, as it came to maturity. Nor do I think the human *mollusc*—for such creations are—can preserve such an assured dead level of mind and body as to be able to boast that it dies unchanged."

"Nor of position?"

"Nor of position. What a heap of fallacies has been built up on that one simple and most practical clause of the *Church Catechism*—'to do my duty in that station of life to which it shall please God to call me.' That has been strictly interpreted to mean the station to which one is born, and I have heard my mother say that when she was a girl, no more injurious imputation could be cast upon a young person than the charge that he, or she, was trying to get out of his or her station ! If you were born in a cottage, in a cottage you must live all your days ; if your father tilled the ground, or followed a handicraft trade, you also must break up the soil, or follow the trade of your progenitor ! It was presumption, and even

wickedness, in you to aspire to something higher. What was good enough for those who came before you was good enough for you ! ”

“ There would always be this difficulty in such a crude process of reasoning—no one ever has quite followed in the wake of his ancestors. Each generation has had its developments; each one, with very, *very* few exceptions, either rises or falls in the social scale. No one, I should say, leaves off as he began; he is the better or the worse, even in merest externals, for the years that have elapsed since he began life. No ! the station to which God calls us is that which we are individually fitted to fill, and which, by His Divine help, we may adorn. Whatever position one may gain by the *lawful* exercise of one’s talents, and one’s energy, is certainly that station in life to which one is ‘ *called*. ’ Do you not agree with me ? ”

“ I do, indeed. But we have wandered on while we have been talking, and I am bound to confess that I am not at all certain where we are at the present moment. We are quite out of the Dunham Woods; we must have taken a wrong turn.”

“ Shall we retrace our steps ? ”

“ I think not. I have never been here before, and there is a perfect labyrinth of paths, if we may call them so; they are not more than rabbit-tracks, I am afraid, and it is growing so dark in this dense wood, that there would be but small chance of our regaining the main road from which we started. Rather let us press onward, and get clear of the trees; once out in the open, I shall know exactly where we are, and the shortest way home. This path seems a little wider than the others; let us follow it.”

And so they plodded along the shadowy aisles of the dark pine-wood, for they had long ago left the pleasant vicinage of oak and beech and larch, and it seemed to Joan that they were getting further and further from the sea. It comforted her, however, to perceive that as they advanced the path grew wider and more defined, and presently showed recent marks of cart-wheels. It was, therefore, no mere animal’s track, leading into the depths of the wood, where no foot save that of keeper or poacher or strayed wanderer ever trod. And ere long

they came to a broad cross-road, green and flowery, but worn into deep ruts from the passing to and fro of the heavier kind of vehicles. And then Arthur Warrendale stood still.

"I never was here before in my life," he said, standing still, in evident perplexity; "and do you know, Joan, I am afraid I am deficient in the organ of locality? I have not the least idea which way we ought to go. It seems to me that we have lost ourselves; that is to say, I have lost myself, and led you into a similar perplexity."

"Then let us try to find ourselves! It is as embarrassing for the moment to be lost in a wood as in a maze of worldly cares and anxieties,—especially when it is growing dark. Let us stand still and consider. Have you no notion of the points of the compass?"

"None whatever! We set out with our faces towards the south, and we ought by good rights to have come out long ago on the lower slopes of Bracken Fell, and so got into that lovely lane that skirts the shore for a mile or two. We could then have returned home either by St. Margaret's Cove and across the heath, or through the lower lodge-gates. But we have turned so frequently and wound about so continuously, that I have completely lost my bearings, and not a trace of sea or sky is visible. I am so sorry, Joan, for I am afraid you are getting very tired."

"I am not frightened at a little weariness of limb; a certain amount of stiffness and soreness to-morrow is the worst that can ensue. Where does the wood lead to on this side?"

"Ah! that is what I cannot tell you. It humiliates me to confess myself such an ignoramus on my own land; but so it is. Either I never came this way before, or the place has altered since I was here, or else I have forgotten all about it. My fear is lest we find ourselves, an hour or two hence, on the fell-side, half-a-dozen miles from home."

Joan stood still, and shut her eyes. She kept them closed for several minutes.

"What are you doing?" asked Arthur, a good deal puzzled.

"I am trying to see."

"Rather an unusual way of doing so, is it not?" he inquired, in an amused tone. "Why, now you are covering your eyes with your hands!"

"Did you never try the same plan on a murky night on first coming out into the darkness?"

"Oftentimes; but all you can possibly gain here is a better view of the mosses and plants at your feet. And that will not help us to find our way."

"Will it not! I think it may. There! now; let me take a good look into the twilight. I shall see what has hitherto been invisible. Yes, I think I have a clue!"

"Have you indeed?"

"Do you see those tall spindly firs where the thicket is densest? Well! on the top of the stems there is still a faint ruddy glow; that shows us where the sun has set. Our backs, then, must be towards the Chalfonts Fells, for at this time of the year the sun sets well towards the north, and this is the path we must take in order to get out of the wood."

"It is not so very large a wood, after all. I expect we have been describing something of a circle. You advise, then, that we turn to the left?"

"I am tolerably certain that is our only way, for if we continue straight on we shall at every step increase the distance between ourselves and Dunham Tower, and if we are very late Mrs. Warrendale will begin to be uneasy."

"I believe you are right; let us put the best foot foremost, and get out of this obscurity. Ah! the path widens, and we can see the sky overhead. Now we are going uphill. The trees, too, are less close together; it is not nearly so dark as it seemed a few minutes ago; and here we come to a gate, which opens apparently upon the heathland."

A few minutes more and the young people found themselves free of the wood, and on rough, peaty, rising ground, tumbled all over with masses and boulders of grey limestone rock. It was not really dark, for it was not more than nine o'clock, and the summer evening was fair, and the western skies still rosy with the sunset glow; the summit of the distant fells showed the rich reflection of

the gold and ruby tints that glorified the western heavens, and faintly touched the cloudlets far away in the extreme north. But there was no sea to be discerned, and both Joan and Arthur were still puzzled.

"I cannot think where we are," said the latter, looking over a wide peat-moss and up a rather precipitous fell-side. "We must have got far away from the shore somehow."

"Let us get a little higher, and we *must* see some familiar landmark. Yes! I thought so! There is Wharstone Crag, and there are the Leyton Mosses! Mr. Warrendale, I do think we must be in the neighbourhood of the Unfathomable Lake."

"Surely not so far away as that! And yet this is very like the other side of Beetle Fell—the side, I mean, that we never see from Argendale. Let us take this path, and keep to it, if possible, for I perceive by the reedy grass that we are in the neighbourhood of bogs."

So on they tramped resolutely, till the path, which was really only a track made by the crag-sheep, ended in nothing, on a sort of platform of crumbled rocks, or *screes*. But from this eminence was a good view of the weird lake, about which such strange tales were told. Great Hayewater lay almost at their feet. It looked weird and awful in the fast-fading evening light, for it was too close under the Fell to catch any reflection of the rose-tints that still lingered on the higher grounds. There was something in it that almost frightened Joan—the waters were so unnaturally still and dark, and the fatal white sands showed pale and eerie through the deepening dusk.

"How foolish I am," she said presently; "I do not like to look at it—that black, mysterious lake! It was blue enough when we saw it together on that never-to-be-forgotten day."

"It is black with shadow only, for the water is quite limpid; but it seems to me larger than when I saw it last. Yes, it has a most dreary aspect, I must confess. I should not like to pass the night on its solitary shores. Now for a scramble! I know the way well enough, but we shall not be home till half-past ten."

"Must we skirt those uncanny sands?"

"No; there is a path which takes us quite away from

them. The place reminds you of what happened here that day."

"Of what might have happened but for *you*! Ruby has never forgotten you, Mr. Warrendale. She put your name into her prayers the day after, and I believe it stays there now."

"I hope it does. I like to think I am prayed for by that sweet, pure-hearted child; though, of course, she is not a child now. Somehow, I always think of her as she was when first I saw her—a perfect vision of childish loveliness, in a short white frock and crimson ribbons! It is quite a pity that some children ever grow up."

"I cannot quite endorse that sentiment, for I am proud of my child's continual development; though sometimes—I own it—I sigh over the days that are gone never to return when my Ruby was a little one, and liked nothing better than to sit upon my lap in summer gloaming and winter dusk, and listen to a story. But she is as sweet and affectionate as ever, and will be—I believe—a really beautiful young woman."

"How dearly you love the child!"

"I do, indeed! I tremble sometimes when I think how she has twined herself round my very heart-strings—my precious one! We have never been separated before. I wonder if she will be altered when I meet her again. I should like *you* to see her, Mr. Warrendale—the child whose life you saved."

"And I hope I shall see her soon, Joan, for I have no intention of letting this renewed friendship of ours drop. We are never to be long apart again, are we? My mother will not know what to do without you; she loves you very much, Joan—almost as much as she loves Minnie."

"Mrs. Warrendale is *very* kind to me; she is so considerate, so gentle and loving—just my idea of a mother."

"And you are just her ideal of a daughter! She will not let you go—nor shall I—without promise of speedy return. You will always be an essential part of Dunham Tower for the future."

It was getting quite dark now, and Arthur drew Joan's arm within his. She let it remain there with a certain feeling of security and comfort—a pleasant sense of depend-

ence and support such as she had never known before ! And as she plodded up that rather steep lane—their nearest cut to Dunham Tower—leaning on that strong arm, she felt wonderfully happy. And suddenly it flashed across her mind that an affection for Arthur Warrendale had insensibly grown upon her, and that, without him, life would never be again complete as it was now.

It was almost eleven o'clock when they reached home at last, and found Mrs. Warrendale in extreme anxiety lest they had gone on to the treacherous Earnseat shore, and been overtaken by the tide. She pretended to scold Arthur for not taking better care of Miss Carisbroke ; but really and truly she was so glad to see him again before her eyes safe and sound, that her lecture died away in fond words of thankfulness. As for Joan, she made much of her, insisted on helping her to undress, and taking up to her the daintiest little supper possible. " Good-night, my dear child, and God bless you ! " were Mrs. Warrendale's parting words, as she left Joan to repose.

But tired as Joan was, she never felt farther from sleeping. She lay awake, brooding over her own unspeakable happiness—her newly-discovered joy ; for she knew now, though nothing definite had been *said*, that Arthur Warrendale loved her.

" And he is the only man in all the world I could ever wish to marry," she said to herself, when again and again she had gone over, in her own mind, every word and look that had passed between them that evening. Arthur had not *told* her that he loved her, certainly ; but he had said so much, and spoken so tenderly, and held her hand so closely, that she could not doubt the happy truth. " And if I do not marry him, I will be an old maid, like my dear Meliora," was her last thought, ere, in the early summer dawn, sleep surprised her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A SUMMER ROSE.

"A spell was laid upon me
With which I could not cope;
The air was faint with roses,
The sea lay like a mist;
The flowers beyond the sunlight
Were waiting to be kissed."

It was late when Joan awoke again. The dawn had brightened into high day; the sunshine streamed in through the blinds; the birds were singing their merriest songs in the great beeches round about the tower, and the full-tide waves were rolling into the estuary to the tune of that grand old monotone that has sounded on and on ever since the world began—that will never cease till, in the last awful day, the sea shall restore her dead.

Joan had slept so soundly that she scarcely remembered for the moment where she was. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, and then she knew that something—she hardly knew what—was making her strangely happy. She was beginning to recall the incidents of last night's walk, when there was a light tap at the door, and Mrs. Warrendale entered.

"Well, my dear!" was her gentle accost, "and are you rested? This is my third visit to your room. Each time before you were so soundly asleep that I stole away again, and bade the maids go about their work quietly at this end of the house. I thought nothing would do you so much good as 'having your sleep out,' as we say of tired children."

"Indeed, you are very kind, Mrs. Warrendale; but I am quite ashamed of myself, sleeping in this way, and on such a lovely morning, too. What o'clock is it?"

"The stable-clock struck ten as I came along the corridor; so it is not so dreadfully late after all. Now I am going to fetch your breakfast."

"Oh, pray do not, dear Mrs. Warrendale. You must

not wait upon me. I am quite well, and ready to get up."

"You will not get up till you have had your breakfast. Besides, it is all cleared away downstairs. We had to be rather earlier than usual, for Arthur suddenly recollected, after you had gone to bed last night, that he would be obliged to go to St. Ulpha's this morning, to attend a meeting of importance. So he had to make a rush for the 9.40 train from Earnseat. Now be a good child, and do as you are bid."

"It is only too delicious to have some one to obey. You don't know how tired I sometimes am of feeling myself sole and indisputable authority. Of course, there must be a head, and a supreme head, to such a household as ours; but I occasionally caution Brenda and Ruby not to submit too implicitly, lest I become a tyrant."

"There is not much fear of that, I imagine! But now, then, you shall have a treat; you shall obey as if you were my own little daughter, so please to lie down, Miss Joan, and wait patiently till your self-constituted mother brings you your breakfast."

Joan sank back again on her pillows, with a satisfied smile; it was very sweet to be petted at all—unspeakably so to be petted by Arthur's mother. She lay still, wide awake, yet, as she could have fancied, half dreaming that she was reading a nice, pleasant story about some one else. She looked round the handsomely-furnished, spacious room, which, during the last fortnight, had grown so familiar, and recollected that the morning before she had contemplated it in pretty much the same way, and asked herself how it would be when the holidays were over, and the day arrived for leaving her present quarters! She felt that insensibly even the inanimate objects around her had grown inexpressibly dear. She knew that once more settled in her own comfortable but homely room at Chestnut House, she would recall every feature of the guest-chamber that she now occupied. She would shut her eyes and see once again the pretty rose-lined hangings; the Rose-du-Barri toilet-ware; the carpet, all moss and sprays of sweet briar; the luxuriously-appointed toilet-table, and the large wardrobe, with its full-length mirror.

And she had sighed to herself, "Ah! how easily one is spoiled! how soon one becomes accustomed to a life like this! The schoolroom seems a thousand miles away; even Brenda and my darling child seem a long way off. Joan! Joan! take care what you are about! Do not let yourself be enervated by what ought to brace and strengthen you for fresh toil; remember this is not your rest."

But now she somehow felt as if it really were in some sense her rest—her happy, earthly rest—and, half-thankfully, half-timidly, she accepted it as such. Had not Arthur said, not many hours before, as they plodded up the rocky, steep ascent, between the ferny banks, where the glow-worms shed their lustre across the path, that he would not let her go, that she would always be an essential part of Dunham Tower for the future? He had all but asked her to remain there with him; it was impossible that she could mistake his meaning, for he was certainly not one of those heartless gay deceivers who amuse themselves by exciting hopes that are meant deliberately to be unrealised. Arthur Warrendale would never speak as he had spoken, unless he intended to convey the impression she had received. And surely his mother treated her as something more than an ordinary guest, as one who might be dearer and closer to her than any mere favoured visitor.

That very morning Arthur had said to Mrs. Warrendale, "Mother, I leave Joan in your care. Do not let her go out in the heat to tire herself. I want her to be fresh for another ramble this evening. I should like to take her along the Earnseat shore."

"Very well; you may be sure I shall take care of her. But just one word, my dear; was it all settled between you last night?"

"Nothing was settled. I would not trouble her when she was so dead-beat; she could scarcely put one foot before the other. If anything had happened you would have heard of it, you may be certain. Neither of us would care to keep a secret from you. And you still quite approve?"

"Quite. The more I know of Joan, the more I admire and love her. But I am just a little afraid—a little uncer-

tain, rather! Oh, my boy, are you perfectly sure you really, *really* love her?"

"Really love her? How can you question it, mother?"

"Arthur, I was once in love myself, and I have not forgotten all about it. And I remember as well as if it were yesterday how your dear father looked and spoke in those first happy days, when we both found out that we were all the world to each other. And——"

"And some signs and tokens are wanting in my case, would you say? But, my dear mother, we all have our separate ways of manifesting affection. A man rarely goes in precisely his father's tracks, especially, I fancy, in the matter of courtship. I suppose no two men ever proposed in exactly the same fashion."

"Probably not; there are a thousand ways of making love, I dare say, and it does not matter which way you take, provided it is fully understood and appreciated. That was not what I meant; my misgiving is, lest it be not, after all, *the real thing!*"

"Mother, you vex me! Do you not think I am old enough to know my own mind? Have I not waited all these years for her?"

"You have waited for some one, undoubtedly, and I like to think that some one was Joan Carisbroke. Do not be vexed, Arthur, but I think it would go very hardly with her, if, after giving her whole heart to you, she found out that she was not all to you that you were to her!"

"She will never find out *that*. I shall only love her more and more as the years go on. Mother, what put such absurd doubts into your head? Can there be any better foundation for a life-long love than pure esteem? Cannot a man walk into love as well as fall into it? It seems to me that the first course of action is only impossible in extreme youth. I believe you are growing romantic in your old age."

"Perhaps I am, Arthur, perhaps I am; and I will say no more. It would be a great disappointment to me now, if Joan were not to be my daughter."

"It will be altogether her own fault if she be not! But it strikes me, mother, that we are taking things for

granted in most impertinent fashion. We are absolutely counting our chickens before they are hatched. Suppose Joan only regards me as a friend, as *your* son! Suppose she be already engaged!"

"Are you obliged to attend this meeting?"

"Morally, I believe I am; for the very movements I have been striving so earnestly to inaugurate will be brought before the committee to-day, and it behoves all who go in for reform to be at their post ready for the conflict. Yes, I believe duty calls me to St. Ulpha's; Joan would be the first to despise me if I were a laggard in the fight, even for her sake. But tell her all about it; the meeting quite slipped my memory last night, and it will seem strange if she comes down presently and finds me over the hills and far away."

And then Arthur abruptly finished his breakfast, mounted his favourite horse, and rode across the park and through the flowery lanes to the solitary little station whose platform was sometimes washed at full tide by the briny waves.

Joan's pleasant reverie was cut short by the return of Mrs. Warrendale followed by a servant bearing her breakfast-tray. How often afterwards Joan remembered that sunny morning at Dunham Tower. Mrs. Warrendale sat by the bedside and chatted gaily with her while she ate her egg and toast, and refreshed herself with a cup of super-excellent tea. She told her all about the meeting which Arthur had gone to attend, and further still she gave a full and particular account of his proceedings as a country gentleman among his neighbours, and sketched out several of the plans which had been already mooted between them for the benefit of tenants and dependents generally. "You see," she concluded, "I am not a very efficient helper; I am growing old and lazy, and want to sit still with my hands before me; or, if that may not be, simply to follow the leader, leaving suggestions and arrangements to those who are more competent."

"I believe Arthur—I mean Mr. Warrendale—values your advice most highly. He often says he should not know at all what to do without his mother."

"He is a good son, and honours his mother; but I often wish he depended less upon my judgment. I hope the time is not far distant when he will bring home a wife to Dunham Tower, and then she will naturally take her proper place, and I shall thankfully subside into the dowager."

"Your opinion will always be valued, I am quite sure."

"I trust so; but there are certain responsibilities I am most anxious to relinquish, and I wish Arthur to marry. A man of thirty, or nearly that, ought to have his wife at his side. When I see my son happily married, I shall not have an earthly wish ungratified. I shall be ready and willing when God calls me to sing *Nunc Dimittis*."

"I have often longed to sing that old song, though I am only half your age. I suppose it was impatience, but there have been times when I felt so tired with life's long, rugged journey that I would willingly have anticipated the evening shadows. Mine has not been a smooth path, and a woman, however brave, must, I think, often weary of standing alone and fighting the fight single-handed. Only there is always God's help and promise that they who trust in Him shall never be confounded. But for that, many of us must, I am sure, sink beneath the heat and burden of the day."

"You have been a brave child, Joan. You have always known how to help yourself and others."

"I was forced to it, and Meliora showed me the way. I owe all to her under God."

"She was, indeed, a most excellent and delightful person. Joan, I wonder she never married."

"As many others who did not know her history wondered. She was engaged when about three-and-twenty to a gentleman to whom she was devotedly attached. His name was John Ormond. They were to have been married speedily, when some great misfortune befel his family. I could never exactly understand what the trouble was, but I believe there was shame—not his personally, of course—as well as pecuniary distress. Meliora never told the tale. In early days she could not bear to speak of it, and towards the end, when she wanted to tell me

every particular, the effort affected her so painfully that she was obliged to cease speaking. This much I gathered : John Ormond's father, a supposed wealthy man, was suddenly discovered to be in extreme embarrassment. He was the principal of a firm called 'Ormond's Bank,' and he did what the Bible condemns—*he made haste to be rich*. He did many things he ought not to have done; he speculated wildly, and not with his own money. One thing seems certain, that the odium fell upon the one who did not deserve it. The young man left the country, hoping to make a home for his promised wife in another hemisphere; but it was not to be. The suffering he had undergone undermined his health, and he gradually sank and died."

"Poor Meliora! And she was always faithful to his memory?"

"Always! She told me in her last illness that no spark of any other affection was ever kindled in her heart. Only once she hesitated for a moment, and that was when papa wished to marry her. For our sakes—for we all wished her to be Mrs. Carisbroke—she would, I think, have sacrificed her feelings, but she could not bring herself to contemplate a second engagement. So she lived and died faithful to her one early love."

"Yet there was nothing morbid or sentimental about her?"

"Not in the least. There never was a person less sentimental—what one would call 'romantic!' She suffered greatly, I know; and there was a period when she felt sinking beneath the weight of her sorrow. But, as she told me one day, God put a stronger spirit into her, and showed her that she ought not to be a laggard in life's race because its sweetness had passed away for her. She began to work, and you know what a worker she was! At first she toiled unceasingly, in order to divert her mind from its weary sorrow! but presently she grew to love her self-imposed tasks. There was a certain *hardness* about her, she confessed, that interfered with her usefulness, till she came to live with us at Perrywood, and took upon her the burden of all our cares. Then it was, she said, that she first learned to live for others, and to work for pure love's

sake. She so thoroughly identified herself with us and with our interests that her own relations complained that she was lost to them. To me she was mother, elder sister, and faithful friend all in one."

"One wonders, sometimes, why persons such as she was are taken away from their work among us! I wondered in my own dear husband's case. But God knows best; He sees when the time is come to raise His children to a higher, nobler service in worlds beyond the grave. Their work here is done. He has other and nobler tasks for them that we know not of."

"I have often thought so. If death were the final close, life would indeed be a mystery—'an empty dream,' as has been said. It is rather a foreshadowing of another and better existence—a school in which we are taught lessons more or less difficult, that are to fit us for the great life of eternity. I love to think that my dear Meliora had done all the work her Master gave her to do, and that He had need of her in the courts above. When He called her He really said, 'Come up higher.'"

"My husband used to talk in a similar strain; and one day, a little while before he passed away, he said to me, referring to some unfulfilled schemes which he had cherished, 'I want another world, if it is only to finish what, in God's name, I began here. One life is not enough for a creature who yearns to know and to do God's will fully!' And he did not believe in dying."

"I do not exactly understand? Death is the portion of all, though it may be a blessing—perhaps in disguise."

"There is a change we call death, and what it is no mortal actually knows, since only *One* ever retraced the dark way, and He simply told us to have faith in Himself, and be not afraid. But I, who have seen several departures for another world, cannot doubt that it is really a falling asleep to awake to infinite joy and glory. 'The world recedes, it disappears.' That line seems to me precisely to describe the wonderful transition from one state to another; the awful blank of death is for those who are left behind."

"Meliora said in her last days that the world seemed slipping away from her, not she from it. And surely her

death—that is, the close of her mortal life—was little less than translation! The last time she and I ever had one of our quiet talks together she spoke of John Ormond. It was on Saturday night, and she had been saying how every week brought its appointed work and strength, and how swiftly Saturday nights came round, and then she said, ‘John died on Saturday night, and Saturday night has always been sacred to me ever since I knew it. At first it was a season of grief and pain, an hour that brought with it an ever-recurring sense of loss, but now I rejoice—I have long rejoiced—as Saturday night came round, and brought me nearer the loved one of my youth. I shall soon see him now, Joan; perhaps God will let him be waiting for me at the golden gates; for that God does not ignore our earthly loves that are bound up in Him, I am fully persuaded.’ That was before she fell asleep on the Saturday night; at the same hour on the following day, Sunday, she was for ever with the Lord. Her last day’s march was over; she needed her tent no longer; she was *at home*.”

“Happy Meliora! There were no pains of death for her, no wistful glances back in crossing the river—one moment in the midst of her dearest earthly friends—the next with God’s angels.”

“Yes! I often think her last thought was, ‘In life, in death, O Lord! abide with me.’ I heard her weak voice in those words as the hymn closed—it even helped to swell the *Amen*. I have never heard that dear voice since; I never shall till we meet in yonder blessed world, where there is neither death nor parting.”

“I hope—I cannot help hoping, Joan, my dear, that that meeting is a long way off. There is a long, happy life before you, I trust. You have dear ones in this world to live for.”

“Yes, indeed; Brenda and my child Ruby. I have never been so weary that I did not wish to see her happily married. And you, too, dear Mrs. Warrendale, you are one of my earthly ties, now.”

“I hope so, my dear; and I hope I am not the only one here to whom you cling. My son thinks very much of you, I am sure.”

Joan blushed rosy red. "Mr. Warrendale is very kind," she said; "he will always be my dear friend."

Mrs. Warrendale would fain have asked her if he were only "friend"; but she was a woman of too delicate feelings to put so leading a question; besides, she recollected that it was Arthur's undoubted right to make that inquiry for himself. But the blush and the conscious look in the dark eyes that were fixed on the empty breakfast-cup, while the fingers toyed nervously with the spoon, reassured the anxious mother. She smiled to herself, and then suddenly leaned forward and kissed Joan, but no further word was said, and presently Mrs. Warrendale went away that Joan might make her morning toilet.

What a sweet, peaceful day that was, almost like a Sunday! Joan and Mrs. Warrendale sat together in the library, reading and talking and sewing—the needlework almost a pretence to both ladies—for both wanted to rest, and both continually looked out on the fair scene beyond the open window. First, there was the garden, with its velvet sward and its wealth of lovely flowers; then the park, in which the sleek cattle fed beneath the noble trees; then a stretch of breezy moorland, sloping down to the great estuary, the waters of which rippled and shimmered in the summer sun, under a sky of soft, intensest azure; then the shadowy fells and cliffs on the farther shore; and lastly, the solemn mountains, miles and miles away, rising grandly towards heaven—"the world's great altars!"

They were to dine early, for Arthur was expected home by a train that would bring him to Earnseat Station soon after four, and his man was to drive over the dog-cart for his accommodation. Mrs. Warrendale had her usual afternoon nap, and Joan roamed away into the garden, and far into a mossy, sheltered wood they called "the wilderness"—for there grew almost every wild flower of the district. She found a seat under the shade of a blossoming lime, and there she lingered—thinking—*thinking*, till she was startled by hearing the stable-clock strike five.

She hurried towards the house, expecting every moment to hear the clang of the great dinner-bell. On the steps

of the portico she met Arthur himself, just returned from his expedition.

"I was coming to look for you," he said. "My mother's maid said you were not in your room, and I wanted to give you *this*."

"This" was one of the most beautiful crimson roses Joan had ever seen—perfect in colour and growth, and exquisite in fragrance.

"Oh! thank you," she cried, involuntarily stretching out her hand; "what a lovely flower! Where did you find it?"

"I found it where I left it this morning, in one of the houses in the kitchen garden. I have been watching it for several days, that when it was fit for gathering I might bring it to you. Will you wear it at dinner?"

Joan promised, shyly enough, for Arthur held her hand, and gazed straight into her eyes.

"I must go and dress," she said, nervously. "I am late already."

"My train was late, so dinner has been a little delayed; but I will not keep you now. Joan, will you take a little stroll with me this evening, on the Earnseat shore? I will promise not to miss my way again. Or are you too tired with last night's adventure?"

"I am quite rested, thank you. I should like a walk."

"Very well; we will set off as soon as we have had our after-dinner coffee. And, Joan, I have something to say to you—I have a question to ask you."

"Have you, Mr. Warrendale?"

"Cannot you say—*Arthur*?"

"I could, if you wished it—I suppose."

"Then I do wish it. Well! I will say no more now, or you will have no time to fasten your rose in your dress. Please to wear it in place of that verbena."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE EARNSEAT SHORE.

"The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill ;
A perfect woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort, and command."

"Good evening, young people ! and if you can possibly manage not to lose your way, so much the better. Old folks prefer not to be worried by horrible surmises and dismal forebodings after dark ; and the Earnseat shore has been the scene of many a tragedy !"

The speaker was Mrs. Warrendale, standing in the open drawing-room window, and looking the picture of happy content. She felt pretty well-nigh certain that Arthur would bring back from the wildly-beautiful and treacherous Earnseat shore the daughter she longed to embrace as such ; and he knew the sands and channels too well to run much risk of being surprised by the rising tide, which would not be at the full till nearly midnight.

He looked back, laughing.

"All right, mother ! I could as soon lose myself in our own park as on the shore I have known nearly all my life. And I will take due care of Joan, and bring her back in time for a little supper, which one always seems to want after these evening wanderings. You will take the hint, I know !"

And then Arthur put Joan's arm within his, and, with a farewell glance back to the window, they both turned into "The Wilderness," through which there was a short cut on to the open heath beyond, and across which lay the nearest and loveliest way to the rocky beach below. It was again a splendid evening, the fair northern land was at its fairest, and the summer was in its prime. They chatted as they went, in their usual pleasant fashion, naming the distant mountain peaks which showed dimly, yet clearly, far beyond the lower fells on the other side of the broad estuary ; sometimes stopping to gather a flower or

fern, sometimes pausing to take in at leisure the full beauty of the landscape, sometimes listening to the music of birds and waves and softly-sighing breezes. Joan wore a plain, well-fitting walking costume, of a serviceable, yet pretty, grey material: her hat, trimmed with carnation-coloured ribbons, was of the same neutral tint as the dress; round her slender neck was a simple net frilling, and Arthur's rose was securely fastened at the bosom. She looked very charming, with the rich colour glowing on her cheeks, and brightening the dark, shy, lustrous eyes, while the light sea-air ruffled her black rippling braids of hair, and so caught her drapery as to display the supple grace and willowy motion of her figure.

They wandered on till they reached, not the shore itself, but the fragrant sward of a swelling upland, that sloped gradually to the shingle, and then Arthur found a seat for himself and his companion. "You need not be afraid," he said, as he placed her on a thymy mound, the wild burnet roses and the purpling heather at her feet; "the ground is perfectly dry, and the turf is soft as a velvet cushion. This short grass, well sunned all day, is absolutely dewless at this time of the year. I thought of this seat when I asked you to come here with me this evening. Besides, I have a curious feeling about it; a long time ago I christened it 'My Lady's Throne.'"

"Indeed!"

"Yes! When I was quite a boy I gave it that name; and yet, curiously enough, I never saw any lady, save yourself, sitting upon it. And I will tell you why! I thought even then, when a mere lad, of the wife I would one day woo, and, if God chose, win for myself. I have had vague ideas about her ever since that summer when we were all here together ten years back, and I have dimly seen her—just where you are now, I could not tell how many times. I say 'dimly,' because it has always seemed a sort of vision, fair and sweet, and full of happy promise, but undefined. Now the vision takes substantial form; the purpose grows into shape, and I dare to seat you where I said many times to myself no woman should sit, in my presence, till the one came by, whom I would

humbly pray to be my lady and my queen. In plain words, Joan, will you be my wife?"

"I will—if I may," was the somewhat tremulous answer; "but you know I am not entirely a free agent."

"I did not know it; I held you to be absolutely heart-free and troth-free."

"And you were right. No man in the world has any claim upon me, real or imaginary. But in another sense, I am—shall I say, *compromised*? It has pleased God to make me the head of my family. My unmarried sisters, to a great extent, depend upon me. As your wife, how could I do my duty by them?"

"Answer me one question, dear! Putting your sisters aside, supposing them married, or otherwise provided for, would you hesitate to listen to my suit?"

"No, I would not."

"Then I know that you love me, for such a woman as you are would never give ear to an unloved suitor. You *do* care for me, Joan?"

"Yes; a little, *perhaps*!" And the smile that accompanied the rosy blush was enough to reassure any man whose doubts lay no deeper than those of Arthur Warrendale. The next moment his arms were round her, and he was pouring out the old, old story that the world never wearies of telling or of listening to. And ere the sun went down behind the far-off golden Crinkle Crag, the betrothal ring was on her finger. Only—it was rather too large; for the antique diamond hoop was full-sized, and Joan had particularly slender fingers. It was quite clear that, if worn as it was at present, there would be every chance of the old heirloom of the Warrendales being lost—perchance for ever! And there was a curious rhyming legend about it, which predicted sorrow to the one who, either as bride-elect or as married wife, should be the careless or unlucky loser.

"But see," said Joan, when she had heard the rhyme, "it slips off quite easily. I think I had better not wear it. It will be all the same, you know!"

"Not exactly; for all the ladies of our house have worn it previous to marriage as well as afterwards. It is part and parcel of a Warrendale's betrothal."

"A mere symbol, nevertheless. Did your mother wear it?"

"Most certainly she did, and she wore it till after my father's death. I am not quite certain but that it had to be enlarged for her, she has such plump, white fingers, you know—and that may account for its fitting you so ill! She gave it up to me not many months ago, remarking that I should need it soon for my own betrothed. And, Joan, I know she hoped most earnestly that it would be *you*, and no one else, who was to wear the treasured ring after her. But what are we to do? It is against all traditions of the family not to have it on your engaged finger, and it could not be altered at Lunchester or at Kenburgh. I shall have to take it, or send it, to my mother's jeweller in town."

"It will have been on my finger once, and surely that will be enough to content the family usage? Take it, please, and keep it till you have an opportunity of conveying it to London. It is very valuable, apart from its associations?"

"The diamonds are worth something, I suppose, and the setting is remarkable; but, of course, it is chiefly treasured on account of its history. It was the gift of a monarch to one of my ancestresses. Some day—not now—I will tell you the whole story, and the legend which has grown out of it. What shapely hands you have, Joan!"

Now, whether Arthur was too much occupied in admiring the fair hands of his lady-love, or whether he held the precious token carelessly, it is difficult to say; but, so much is certain, that the ring slipped from his fingers and rolled away, he could not exactly perceive whither! There was a flash of light as the diamonds caught the evening gleam, and then they were seen no more. Both uttered an exclamation.

"There! I have thrown away the family fortunes with my own hand!" said Arthur, after they had searched, without success, in the grass and herbage at their feet, in a juniper-bush very close at hand, and even a good way down the slope that recommenced a few feet beyond the turfy mound, that Arthur had named the Throne. "I am so very glad that the fault was mine—that it did not

fall from your fingers ! If evil come of it, it will touch me alone."

"Can that be?" asked Joan, softly. "Must not the ill that comes to you trouble me also? I am not afraid, for I am not in the least superstitious, and I do not believe that God would allow our happiness, either jointly or individually, to depend upon the fate of a mere piece of property, however valuable ! But I really am very sorry, because I can see by your face how much the accident troubles you, and Mrs. Warrendale, too, will be greatly vexed."

"She will be somewhat disturbed, no doubt, and of course it *is* a vexatious thing to lose a jewel that has been in the family for several centuries, and that has been so closely linked with some of its sweetest and tenderest associations. But I repeat, the fault was entirely my own, and if there are any consequences I must bear them."

"There will be no consequences, save the annoyance which the loss naturally entails ; but let us have another hunt, it cannot have actually disappeared ; it only eludes our search. It must be somewhere about ; let us look again !"

And look they did, till the sun went down behind the giant-fells, till the purple twilight gathered over glittering sea and shimmering sand, till the grey rocks lay in shadow, and the crimson glory died away in the western skies. Then they reluctantly gave up the search, and went down towards the lonely shore.

Though the light had faded, there was still enough to walk securely by, among the fallen crags and great boulders of the beach, and they walked down to the water's edge, where the waves lapped upon the shingle at their feet. How still it was ! The sea-birds were at rest, the boats and "shipping"—so-called—of the lonely little port rocked idly in their miniature harbour ; no human voice broke the silence of the hour, only was heard the soft murmur of the waves close at hand, and the hoarse thunder of the incoming tide along the distant channel. Joan and Arthur stood quietly together on the very margin of the water ; they seemed strangely grave and subdued for a newly-betrothed couple.

"You look tired, darling," said Arthur, at length, glancing at the pale, pathetic face beside him. "What a wretch I am to weary you so! Last night I took you too far afield, and knocked you up completely; to-night I managed to worry you through my carelessness. I wish I had not lost the unlucky thing!"

"I am sure I wish you had not, since it vexes you so much; but I think if the place is well ransacked by daylight, we cannot fail to find it. I hope Mrs. Warrendale will not be troubled."

"I am afraid she will be exceedingly troubled. It is very foolish, I know; but once before the ring was lost, and all sorts of woes came upon the family till it was found again. It seemed then as hopelessly lost as now."

"How was it?"

"The young lady who was then its lawful wearer took it off, to free it from some wax which had got into the filagree-work while she was moulding wax-flowers or fruit, or something of the kind. She laid it down for a moment, and was called away. When, after a short absence, she returned to the room, the ring had disappeared; and yet, as was supposed, no one had entered the apartment."

"A magpie took it, perhaps? One not unfrequently reads of such cases. The bird flies in at the open window, sees the glittering jewel, and, attracted by its brilliance, takes it into his beak, and flies away with it to his nest at the top of some tall tree. Years afterwards, when the nest is rifled or the tree comes down, the missing treasure is discovered, with a miscellaneous collection of stolen property, in the magpie's private stores."

"No; it was not the *gazza ladra* of that day, though in the search which ensued the magpies did not escape suspicion. It was known that there were several of these thievish birds in the neighbourhood, and all the nests round about were carefully inspected; but though a good many long-lost articles were restored to their owners, the betrothal-ring was not among them. Some years elapsed before the mystery was solved, and when the ring was found the hapless lady was dead."

"How was that?"

"The loss preyed so much upon her mind, and the

superstitions of the family took such firm hold of her, that her health became impaired, and, as the records of Dunham Tower have it, 'she pined and dwined away, and at last deceased, like one destroyed by a spell of witchcraft.' She vowed, I believed, never to wear a wedding-ring till the mysteriously lost betrothal-pledge should be restored. So the young Warrendale of the story lost his bride, and she died of consumption."

"I should say the fatal malady was really upon her when the ring was lost, and the anxiety and disappointment that followed developed the first symptoms of real illness. I am sadly unromantic, you will say; but I do not think, as a rule, that either men or women die of love! There are some few exceptions, no doubt; but they are wonderfully few. This subtle thing we call our mortal life takes a great deal of killing! But women are more likely to die of love than men."

"And wherefore?"

"Because—though I believe man to be the superior creature as regards *brains*—I think woman has the pre-eminence where the affections are concerned. She loves, perhaps, less passionately, but more deeply, and certainly with more constancy."

"Nay, dear, many men love with all the depth and fidelity of which human nature is capable, but I will not dispute with you as to whether our sex or yours is the truest or the tenderest; we will leave that to time, and to our future life together, to determine. And, 'love is love for evermore.'"

"Meanwhile, you are keeping me in suspense as to the recovery of the lost ring. If a magpie did not steal it, who did?"

"A child! A little child, meaning, however, no harm. She was distantly related to the family, and was a great pet of the bride-elect, whom she was supposed to be visiting. Being allowed a good deal of freedom, she ran into the young lady's chamber without invitation, just as the ring was laid on the dressing-table. Not finding her friend, as she expected, she amused herself, as a child of five or six years of age would, by looking about her; and finally, she took up the ring to examine it, and slipped it

on her own fat little thumb. As far as she herself afterwards recollected, some one called her, and knowing that her maid wanted her for some combing operations, which she specially detested, and always eluded if possible, she ran away, and hid herself in the shrubbery, thinking only of concealment, and quite forgetting the jewel on her hand. She does not appear to have heard of the hue-and-cry that was raised at the disappearance of the ring; and, as far as can be ascertained, she went away to her own home, some miles distant, that same evening, and did not remember for some time that she had taken anything from the lady's chamber. When she did recall the fact, she did not realise its importance. At any rate, she made no confession, and her little escapade gradually faded from her memory. Three years afterwards the ring was found in a bed of moss and loose soil at the foot of a tree, and restored to the Warrendales; but the hapless bride was, as I told you, *dead*."

"And how was it ascertained that the little girl was the culprit?"

"Curiously enough, the ring was discovered by an elder sister, a very beautiful girl, just introduced to society. Her name was Araminta, of all lackadaisical names. From her the child, then grown old enough to reflect, heard the story, and at once remembered that she had herself worn the circlet at that identical spot, and had never seen it afterwards. She confided to Araminta the fact; was questioned, and told the simple truth. And Araminta was my great-great-grandmother."

"She married your ancestor, then? the one whose bride pined and dwined away from distress of mind and apprehension?"

"Yes; and she wore the ring till her eldest son needed it for his own betrothal. And so it was handed down from mother to son, till this most unlucky evening, when it seems as hopelessly lost as it was a hundred years ago."

"Never mind! We will hunt till we find it. What a pity we cannot impound a few of the glow-worms to light us at once in our search. And, Arthur, we will try not 'to pine and dwine away' for the loss of the treasure, should we be so unfortunate as not to recover it."

"We *must* recover it ! But let us talk no more about it to-night ; we have lost time enough already in discussing the fruits of my stupid carelessness. And, ring or no ring, you are my own, Joan ; are you not ?"

"I suppose so. But we never finished one part of our conversation. I confessed that I did love you, Arthur, and I here and now declare that no other man ever shall be, or ever could be, my husband. Still, I am not quite sure whether I ought to let you bind yourself to me, for I do not see how I am to leave Chestnut House. What is to become of Brenda and Ruby ?"

"You shall have both of them with you, dearest. Your sisters will be my sisters, of course. You must give Ruby all possible advantages. She must have a season in town ; no doubt she will marry happily and well. Did you think I ever dreamed of taking you from your child ? Ruby shall be our joint care."

"But Brenda ? Poor Brenda is neither a beauty nor a genius ; she is only a dear, good, plodding little woman. And she would not, I know, be persuaded to eat the bread of dependence. Brenda has her pride—her proper self-respect, though she is in many ways one of the humblest creatures living."

"Humble, but not *'umble !* I understand. Yet some arrangement might be made, surely. If Brenda is of so independent a spirit, would it not be possible to make her nominal head and actual proprietor of your Hampstead Heath establishment, perfectly efficient and experienced persons being engaged to aid and support her in her work ?"

"That might be managed. I think it might be, if Brenda herself does not object ; but, you see, it would be Christmas before we could make any sort of change."

"Christmas ! That is quite too long a time to wait. I thought you would surely come to me in the autumn."

"Do you know, I think you are a very bold, naughty man to talk so soon about our wedding, Mr. Warrendale ! We were engaged an hour ago, and here you are——"

"Here I am, pleading for my own speedy happiness ! And you will not be so cruel as to delay it, Joan dear ! All may be settled by the end of September, I am sure. Promise me that it shall be so."

"Nay, I cannot, must not, make any promises till I have fully considered the matter. I must look my duty fairly in the face."

"Your first duty, now, is to me, darling?"

"Not yet. It will be—some day. When I am your wife"—and Joan blushed hotly in the fast declining dusk—"you will naturally be supreme on every occasion; but, till then, I must think of those whom God has committed to my charge. No; I will not pledge myself to any alteration of circumstances till next Christmas is over. I cannot deal hastily with Brenda; I must accustom her gradually to contemplate the change; also, I must reflect, and take counsel with her true friend and mine, Maud Clarke, as to whether the course proposed would be likely to secure Brenda's comfort and peace of mind. You see, Brenda is really more of a responsibility than Ruby, though the one is a woman grown—older, indeed, than myself—and the other is almost a child."

"Mrs. Clarke is Meliora's sister, is she not?"

"Yes, and I have the greatest confidence in her judgment. She is one of the wisest, as well as one of the best, of women, only a little inferior to Meliora herself."

"Joan, I believe Meliora was your first love?"

"Perhaps she was! I loved her very dearly, and, when she died, I felt as if part of my own life was gone. And, I have just thought of it, she left me a little money, all that she had saved. It was not much; but I have never touched it, and it has accumulated, of course, and amounts now to a few hundreds. That could be secured to Brenda, or to Ruby, could it not?"

"Certainly! By all means! I should urge it, if you did not. I want nothing but yourself, Joan. I am really glad that you are no heiress. And if what you have is so little, you must let me—I have the right, you know!—add something to it, so that you may leave your sister so comfortably situated that she shall be none the worse, in one way, at least, for what I am taking from her. When there is perfect love, it does not matter which side gives, or which receives."

"It does not, where that perfect love certainly exists."

"And you do not doubt *my* perfect love, Joan?"

"No, not at this moment. But I am so afraid lest we are acting too hastily. I cannot think what made you care for me! I am too old and too grave for you."

"You are not always grave; you have a certain gaiety and humour of your own that exactly suits my taste; besides, I never cared for unbroken spirits which tend to frivolity. And as to being too old, my dear Joan, we are almost of an age."

"Too nearly of an age! and I am the elder. And so many of life's burdens have pressed so long upon my shoulders, and my occupations have so tended to staidness and even to precision, that I am older than my years. A wife should never be older than her husband."

"Not even by a few months?"

"Not even by a few months! She ought to be at least one or two years his junior—five years of seniority on his part is to be desired."

"Now, my dear Joan, you are tilting at windmills. You are making obstacles where none exist. It would be foolish—worse, *wicked*—to throw away our best chance of happiness and usefulness, just because you happened to come into the world half a year before I did. You are young enough to please me; I would not have you other than you are. And now we must, I think, hasten home, or the dear mother will begin to be anxious again; and we almost promised her not to offend again as we did—or, rather, as *I* did, last night! We must go home by the lane, for the path up to the heath is too narrow and slippery in this uncertain light, and the shore would take us too far round, even if the tide were not rising too rapidly. The mother will be so glad to hear what we have to tell her; you are her choice as much as mine, Joan dear."

The glow-worms shed their golden green lustre upon the hedge-banks as they rather hurriedly pursued their homeward way; masses of honeysuckle, in full flower, shed their almost overpowering fragrance upon the still night air; the sea sounded majestically in the distance, breaking on the great crags on the other side of the channel. And, when they came out of the little nutwood, on the very borders of the park, the stars were faintly lighting the peaceful heavens of the quiet, sweet summer

night. And Joan, in her heart of hearts, said, gratefully, though without audible speech, "Oh, my God! my Father! how fair and good is this world which Thou hast made for Thy unworthy children! How sweet it is to live,—to love, and be beloved! All earth's joys, as well as heaven's, are from *Thee*, oh kind and loving Father. Praised be Thy holy name!"

CHAPTER XL.

MARGERY'S PREDICTION.

"I had a dream which was not all a dream."

"I HAVE brought you back your daughter, mother," said Arthur, as he led Joan into the lighted room, where Mrs. Warrendale sat with her newspaper before her, and her knitting in her hands. "Here is the future Mrs. Arthur."

Without a word, Mrs. Warrendale rose, and clasped Joan in her arms, imprinting a true mother's kiss upon her lips. Then she turned to her son and kissed him tenderly. At last she spoke:—"Thank you, my boy, for giving me this dear daughter, the one I have always wished for. Joan, my love, out of all the women in the world, I should have chosen you—had such choice been mine—for Arthur's wife. I think now, God has granted me all my heart's desire, and I am ready and willing when He calls me."

"And may that be at a very distant period, mother dear," was Arthur's affectionate reply. "Our happiness would scarcely be complete without you; we shall not leave you out in any of our schemes. Shall we, Joan?"

"No, indeed, that we shall not! I am not at all sure," she added archly, and with a smile and a blush that made her look at least ten years younger, "that I did not accept

you, Arthur, quite as much on her account as on your own! I could not possibly miss the chance of being mamma's own daughter."

"I must write to Minnie to-morrow," said Mrs. Warrendale, releasing Joan with another fond embrace. "She will be so pleased that her place is filled. We must have her and dear Edmund over for your wedding, my dears!"

"That we must!" returned Arthur, heartily; "and mother, you must tackle Joan about that same auspicious event. She declares she cannot think of coming to the Tower till next year! As we are not exactly in our teens, and your consent is fully given, and the home is all ready, or can be so, in a few weeks at the utmost—I do not see why we should wait. Life is not so long that we should needlessly delay our happiness."

"I must say you are most audacious, Arthur!" said his mother, trying to assume a reproving tone; "you are only just an engaged man, and press your bride at once to name the day! You must have patience; young ladies cannot be hurried into Holy Matrimony."

"*Hurried*, mother! I like that! It is now July, and if Joan cannot get her new clothes ready by the end of September, I think it is a pity! I'll see to the settlements at once; I'll write up to Mr. Freeman to-morrow, and give the preliminary instructions. As for the clothes—the *trousseau*, as they call it—can't you undertake it, mother? Or would it not be wiser to order now only what is necessary, and let Joan get everything else when she is in Paris?—that is, if she consents to adopt a plan I have in my head for the wedding tour."

"I will very willingly undertake the *trousseau*," replied Mrs. Warrendale; "but I do not think that is Joan's chief difficulty. It is not as if she were a mere girl at home, as Minnie was when she married—she has weighty affairs of her own to settle. Joan is already the head of a family, the mistress of a house, remember!"

"I do remember, and I think it can be all easily arranged. But we will not talk about that to-night; we are rather tired, and you promised us some supper."

"It has been ready in the dining-room for a full hour; I expected you as soon as it became dusk. But Arthur,

where is the betrothal-ring? I do not see it upon my dear Joan's finger."

"Mother, I do not know what you will say to me! But the ring was a little too large for Joan—she has such very slender fingers! and while I was examining it, thinking how I should get it up to town for the necessary alteration, it slipped from my hand and rolled—I know not whither. We searched every cranny, and inspected every blade of grass within a reasonable distance, and it was nowhere to be seen; really, it seemed like magic, it disappeared so unaccountably. But don't look like that, mother! Joan and I are going to the heath to-morrow, directly after breakfast, and we mean to hunt till we find it. The thing cannot have gone out of existence, you know, nor can it have rolled very far from the spot where we were sitting. It was on that mound I christened 'My Lady's Throne' so long ago."

"How *did* you contrive to drop it, Arthur? That ring, too, of all other rings! and just as you were pledged to Joan!"

"I cannot tell, mother. I am not usually given to dropping things. It seemed to slip away from me like a living creature; one moment it was securely on my finger, the next it was apparently—nowhere."

"It must be found. Don't look distressed, Joan, my dear; it is no fault of yours that it is lost. But Arthur should have been more careful; indeed, it was a pity that he should have taken it into such a place; it was lost before out of doors."

"Yes; Arthur told me the story of Araminta and of the bride who 'pined and dwined away'; but even if the circlet never be regained, I, at least, will try not to worry myself to death. I know it must be extremely disturbing to lose so valuable an heirloom; but, dear Mrs. Warrendale, you surely do not believe that evil will betide us just because it is missing?"

"No, no! I do not believe it; and yet it makes me uncomfortable. I would give a hundred pounds to see it at this moment safe on your finger. I have, I know, a spice of superstition in my nature, and my long residence in Germany has fostered it; though at the same time, com-

mon sense protests against the feeling, and conscience rebukes me for my want of faith in Him in whose hands alone are the issues of life and death, who orders every step of our devious way through life."

And then, after a little more talk, they went to supper, which was not enjoyed as it ought to have been. There was evidently a shadow on Mrs. Warrendale's usually serene brow, and Arthur, spite of every effort to appear quite at ease, was certainly not in his ordinary good spirits. Joan longed for the morning, that she might go to the heath and search every cranny, and tuft of grass, and every inch of ground, from the mount right down to the foot of the sloping declivity. She only hoped it had not fallen into the shingle, but that was surely impossible; the distance was too great, and the descent by no means unbroken. It was a comfort, though, to remember, that high-water mark was far below the line of shingle in question, except on rare occasions of equinoctial spring-tides. Joan determined to spend the whole day, if necessary, in exploring the scene of her betrothal.

When she had retired to her chamber, Mrs. Warrendale went out on the terrace, where Arthur was still moodily pacing up and down. For almost the first time in his man's life he spoke hastily to his mother.

"Now, mother, don't come to worry me. I am as vexed as you can be, and a great deal more, for this unlucky accident has quite spoiled my evening. Yes, it was careless, I know, but it's done, and can't be undone; and it is of no mortal use to make a rout."

"I am not going to make a rout, my dear; I am only sorry. It was very silly to attach any credit to the foolish superstition, I know; but somehow that sort of thing sticks to one. Excepting that the ring is a valuable article in itself, and a family relic, I am not sure but that it would be a very good thing if we never saw it again. Then there would be an end to the folly. I was always afraid of losing it myself, from the day your dear father put it upon my finger, at Hazlecroft, till I resigned it to you only the other day."

"I am so provoked at myself! One would think that my fingers were all thumbs! But really, I cannot describe

to you how the thing seemed to twitch itself out of my hand! But I believe we should have found it, had not the daylight failed us. There, let us talk no more about it; we may as well retire to bed."

"So we may, my dear, for all the talking in the world will not mend matters. Good night."

Five minutes afterwards, Mrs. Warrendale was in her own room, and old Margery, who had lived at Dunham Tower from her girlhood until now, when she was considerably over sixty, was in waiting to attend her. She had served the Warrendales faithfully all these years, and generally she conversed with all the freedom of an attached and confidential servant. She at once perceived that something had happened to annoy, even to distress, her mistress, and she was not slow to ask plainly, "And what ails ye to-night, madam?"

"Something most vexatious has occurred, Margery; but first I must tell you that Mr. Warrendale and Miss Carisbroke are engaged."

"The Lord be praised! for it's just what I've prayed Him to do—to draw them two young creatures together. They're made for each other if any two ever was, and it's quite time Mr. Arthur brought his wife home. Well! I hope Mr. Arthur has *quite* made up his mind this time, and will stick to it."

"What do you mean, Margery?"

"Deary me, ma'am, you know as well as I do, if you'll allow me to say so. Didn't he run after that pretty little blue-eyed German miss—the Fräulein Amalia? Then, wasn't he sweet on that handsome young lady, Miss Lina Palmer? not that either of them was fit to stand in your shoes, ma'am, as Mistress of Dunham Tower! And there were one or two more that he paid attentions to, so that people named their names together, and wondered if it was to be a match. But it all came to nothing; it was never more than what people call a *flirtation*, a sort of a thing that I don't myself understand, nor never could; and what is more, don't at all approve of. I don't think people *ought* to play at falling in love any more than they ought to pretend to be religious. So I do hope this is something more than a flirtation — a real out-and-out

attachment that will end in holy matrimony; for Miss Joan is a downright nice young lady—not too young neither, for I've no opinion of chits of girls just out of the nursery. Miss Joan is come to a knowledgable age, and knows what's what, and, above all, knows her own heart, and she is a fine, tall, stately madam that Dunham Tower may be proud of. Handsome, I call her, and as good and sweet as handsome. Let's hope there will be no hitch here, and, old as I am, I'll dance at my young master's wedding."

"Of course there will be no 'hitch,' " said Mrs. Warrendale, in a tone of some displeasure. "And my son never *flirted*! He never went further than polite attentions in any of the cases to which you allude. He has never, to my knowledge proposed to any lady before, and he has done so now, not only with my sanction, but with my blessing and my earnest desire that he should succeed."

"And he has succeeded, you say, madam? Well! I knew there was something in the wind, of course; but I never could quite make out whether Miss Carisbroke returned our Mr. Arthur's regards. Being a discreet gentlewoman, she was, of course, reserved and dignified, as it became her to be, till her lover formally declared himself. I shall go to bed this night with a glad and thankful heart. But what were you saying, madam, about something that had been *vexatious*?"

"Vexatious indeed, Margery!" And there and then Mrs. Warrendale gave her faithful retainer a full, true, and particular account of the catastrophe of the evening. Margery listened with distended eyes and grave face, that grew paler every instant. "You don't say so! you don't say so! the Lord help us, then!" was all that she could reply when the narrative was concluded. "Oh, madam! they will never be married—no, *never*! The pair that loses that ring 'atween 'em will never be joined in holy matrimony—will never be Warrendale, man and wife, of Dunham Tower, in the county of Fellshire."

"I thought I was silly, Margery; but you are sillier still! How can the loss of a ring prevent the marriage of the young people, if they are only true to each other?"

"Ah! if they are only *true*! But they won't be; one

or other of them will be false, or else Miss Joan will sicken and die before the marriage-day arrives."

"Margery, I am surprised at you! I thought you were a more sensible woman. Yes! I know what the old legend says; but legends are not Bible truths, and God is over all."

"Yes, I know, ma'am, I know. But for all that, there's a curse on the bride that loses the 'Warrendale Circlet'; she'll never be wedded wife, for either she'll die, or she or her lover will prove false."

"But it was not the lady who lost the ring in this case, Margery! The fault was none of hers; she had barely seen the circlet when it fell from Arthur's hands."

"Ah, but she had it on her finger, and that made it hers. Oh dear, oh dear! there will either be death or unfaith to part them two; they will never be married now. And all the family will be the worse till the diamonds are seen again."

"Margery, I am really ashamed of you! You are as superstitious as a heathen," said Mrs. Warrendale, severely, at the same time feeling secretly that she was more ashamed of herself than of poor faithful Margery. For, in spite of her assumed displeasure, she could not shake off the feelings of depression and apprehension which the unlucky accident occasioned. And most heartily she wished the missing ring were safe on the finger of Joan Carisbroke.

There was no more to be said, and Margery went away at last, shaking her head, and bitterly bewailing the disaster which had befallen the house. "For," as she said to herself, when she lay down in her bed, "nothing will go right till the Royal Diamonds come back to us again, and they won't be found in a hurry, or I'm much mistaken. And I shan't sleep a wink, I know, for thinking of it!"

Meanwhile, Joan slept peacefully and profoundly, for she was over-tired. But towards morning she dreamed that she saw the ring just under tide-water near the place where she and Arthur had stood on the shore, and that she stretched forth her hand to recover it, and some one, or something, drew it away just as she thought she

grasped it. Again she saw it shimmering in the shallow wave that lapped the sand and shingle, and again she strove to take possession of it, but in vain; she could not succeed in touching it; it seemed to slip away as soon as her eager grasp was upon it, and all the while the tide was stealthily rising, and she began to be afraid of the treacherous Earnseat shore. And suddenly the light failed, and darkness fell around her, leaden clouds hung heavily on the farther mountains, and black, awful shadows lay upon the wild cliffs on the opposite side of the Channel, which roared and surged tremendously.

She looked about for Arthur, but he was nowhere to be seen. She tried to turn away from the desolate shore, where the waves rose higher and higher, till they foamed around her in great, billowy, inky masses that appalled her as she gazed; but the whole aspect of the place was changed, the cliffs frowned upon her, and seemed to touch the skies. There was no path of any kind for her stumbling feet, no break in the perpendicular, rampart-like wall of rock that hemmed her in, and the angry, surging waters came ever nearer and nearer! Then suddenly she saw close at hand the ring flit by her in the trough of a tremendous wave, and she snatched at it once again, only to find her hand filled with slimy masses of the trailing seaweed with which the Earnseat coast abounds. And all at once she felt herself in deep water, and she was being borne away into the strong, dark current of the roaring channel, and clutched at something that passed near—a piece of drift, she thought; and lo! the darkness melted into sunshine, and the stream flowed smoothly on its way, and the lovely face of her darling Ruby was looking into hers, all radiant with delight at the sudden meeting.

And the next minute Joan was wide awake, sitting upright in bed, and listening to the roar of the wind, which had suddenly arisen, and was tossing to and fro the branches of the great elms and beeches in the park, and driving the waves heavily upon the shore. The perfect calm of the night before had been delusive. Dark storm-clouds had rolled up from the west, and deluges of wild rain were dashing against the panes, while terrific gusts of wind shook the window-sashes. The morning had

broken upon a tempestuous world ; it was past five o'clock, but no ray of sunshine pierced the leaden gloom, and Joan looked from her casement to see the sodden turf, the drenched gravel, and the lilies and roses that had bloomed so sweetly last night all plashed and beaten upon the muddy soil. How was the search for the lost ring to be prosecuted ?

It would be impossible to stand against the wind on the open heath, she decided, and the driving rain-slants would blind any one who should be rash enough to brave the fury of the tempest. Till the storm abated, searching for the circlet was altogether impossible. She went back to bed, and lay listening to the storm, which now raged in all its fury round the house, and now sank into comparative tranquillity, softly sighing and sobbing like a penitent child that is crying itself to sleep.

"Oh, the beautiful garden flowers !" thought Joan, regretfully ; "and, oh, the lovely honeysuckle, and the purple foxgloves, and the creamy wild burnet roses ! This cruel rain and this beating downpour will lay them low for ever ! Poor, sweet flowers, how frail and brief are your pretty, innocent lives !"

And then Joan began to think of her own affairs—of her recent engagement, and of all the changes it involved. What would Brenda and Ruby say when they heard the wonderful tidings ? Would Brenda consent to be left at the head of affairs at Chestnut House ? and would Ruby choose to live with her at Dunham Tower or elsewhere, a dependent on the bounty of her brother-in-law ? The more she reflected the more certain she was that she had done wisely in refusing to fix an early date for her marriage. Nothing must be done hurriedly, and the interests of both Ruby and Brenda must be fully considered.

Thinking thus, Joan fell asleep in one of the intervals of the storm, and when she awoke again it was time to rise and dress for breakfast. The wind had lulled, but the rain still fell thickly, and all the mountains and even the nearer fells had vanished from the landscape, blotted out in grey, impenetrable mists. She expected every moment to hear the first bell ring, for it was close upon the regular breakfast hour ; but she made her morning toilet, even to

its minutest details, and still there was no summons from below. When at last she went down she found herself the first arrival, and she was thinking of returning to her room, when Arthur, looking jaded and weary, made his appearance. He had passed a sleepless night, he told her, the storm which had set in on his side of the house had roused him every time he fell into a doze, and at last sweet slumbers were driven quite away.

"Alas! for our plans!" said Joan, as she poured out a cup of tea for her lover, Mrs. Warrendale having sent word that she would breakfast in her own room. "I suppose we *could not* begin our search this morning?"

"Not while it rains so fast, certainly; not till the sun has dried up the turf a little. I am so afraid the ring may have been washed into the soil, where it will remain for ever, out of sight, though close at hand, and almost within reach. But as we cannot for the present move hand or foot for its recovery, let us try to forget it. I want to talk to you about no end of things, Joan, dear. There is so much on which I must consult you."

And then an hour and more passed away very fleetly, and very happily, in pleasant conversation. Perhaps Mrs. Warrendale, knowing the impossibility of setting forth on the exploring expedition, purposely remained upstairs, that the betrothed pair might enjoy each other's society without let or hindrance. Any way, it was nearly eleven o'clock when she made her appearance. The rain was beginning to abate, there were glimpses of blue in the zenith, the wind was sinking to a calm; there were soon good prospects of a clear, fine evening. It was agreed on all hands that luncheon should serve for early dinner; there was to be kettledrum at half-past four, and afterwards the careful survey of the heath and shoreward slope.

"Come with me to the library," said Arthur, when all this was settled. "Mamma has a Cabinet Council to hold with the maids, as usual, so we will relieve her of our company. Ah! and there is the postman and his bags. We get our letters rather late here, certainly; but that matters little, or not at all, for we get out of the busy world and its troublesome interruptions while we are here.

I feel something like a lotus-eater this morning, Joan ; let us read Tennyson's musical poem—I am just in the mood for it."

"One should only feel like a lotus-eater in the afternoon, and then only under stringent conditions."

"I am feeling just now as if I wanted the land in which it seemed always afternoon."

"A most unwholesome frame of mind !" and Joan tried to look as Minerva might have looked on Ulysses and his companions of old ; but a smile curved her lips, notwithstanding. Never had she felt so happy, so content in herself since Meliora died, spite of the unhappy contretemps of the preceding evening.

"One's mind cannot always be in rude health any more than one's body. One grows weary sometimes—

"Why should we toil alone ?
We only toil who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan ;
Still from one sorrow to another thrown ;
Nor ever fold our wings,
And cease our wanderings,
Nor steep our brows in slumber's holy balm,
Nor hearken what the inner spirit sings,
"There is no joy but calm !"

Why should we only toil, the roof and crown of things ?"

"Because toil is good for us, and this is not our rest. Now I should like to read my letter, please !" For while Arthur was quoting his favourite poet, the servant had brought him the letter-bag, and there was a letter for Miss Carisbroke. Joan had hoped to see a Guernsey post-mark, but the envelope evidently dated from London, and the address was in a handwriting at once strange yet familiar ; she had certainly seen it before, though when and where she could not recollect. She slowly opened the letter and began to read. "Why, it is from my sister-in-law," she cried, in much surprise, as she glanced at the signature ; "it is from Mrs. Carisbroke. I hope nothing is the matter ; but Ada never wrote me any but the shortest *note* before, and this is quite a long epistle."

That something was the matter Arthur quickly gathered from the reader's changing countenance. He watched her till he saw she had reached the last line ; then he put his

arm round her, and whispered, "What is it, dear? It is trouble, I am sure. Whatever it is, remember it belongs now to me as well as to yourself, and I must share it."

"It is trouble, indeed!" and Joan strained her hands together and knit her brows with pain. "I am not sure that I ought to tell you," she said, pitifully; "I am afraid it is very, *very* dreadful. Frank has done something wrong, and Ada thinks he will be taken to prison. She does not write very clearly, but she entreats me to come to them immediately. 'Do come and help us,' she says, in the postscript."

"Indeed, you shall do nothing of the kind. That brother of yours has never behaved properly to you; let him get out of his scrape as best he can. You shall not go, Joan, dear; *I cannot spare you!*"

"Ah, but I must go! I must, indeed!" And from her tone and look Arthur knew that she had made up her mind, and would not unmake it without most convincing reasons.



CHAPTER XLI.

A WEARY JOURNEY.

"And must I leave thee, Paradise?"

"SURELY Joan need not go to the rescue of this good-for-nothing scapegrace," said Arthur, a little later, to his mother. "From all that I have heard, he has ever been a trouble to his family, and matters were not mended when he made an utterly unsuitable marriage. There is no 'old man of the sea' worse than a spendthrift brother, who has a reckless, extravagant wife. Joan had better leave him and her alone to manage their own matters; as folks brew so must they drink!"

"Doubtless! Only in the majority of such cases other people are compelled, *nolens-volens*, to drink of the un-

wholesome beverage concocted by the foolish, unprincipled brewers, and sometimes they have to quaff pretty deeply, to their own great injury and sorrow. Some people, too, are wonderfully ingenious at shifting from their own shoulders the burdens placed there by their folly and their sin. If consequences were simply individual, it would not be so much matter; but the sowing of wild oats involves the reaping by others than the sowers. We cannot hurt ourselves without hurting more or less our fellow-creatures and making them fellow-sufferers."

"So it seems! But do not let us waste time in moralising; Joan is packing, I do believe, and the *Bradshaw* is gone from the library-table."

"I think she is fully resolved to go, and I thought you understood that it was to be so. Did she show you the letter?"

"No, she only read parts of it. She was very much distressed, for she feared there might be indelible disgrace, as well as serious embarrassment. If it is a question of money only, of course I can help to put things straight."

"If she will let you!"

"Oh! as to that, I can persuade her; and if you are certain that she has made up her mind to leave us, perhaps I cannot do better than accompany her to town. But it is inexpressibly vexatious."

"It is, indeed. Yet I feel sure it would be useless to urge her to remain. You know, as well as I do, that Joan will never falter where she is convinced of her duty. For myself, I am bitterly disappointed; I had so much to say to her, and so many nice little plans for the remainder of her visit."

A minute afterwards Joan walked into the room, looking resolute but pale; she had an open *Bradshaw* in her hand, and she began immediately to calculate the times of the trains, which would allow her to reach London that night. "You cannot possibly go to-day," said Arthur, looking over her shoulder at the railway-table; "it is so long a journey to town."

"It could be managed, if you would drive me to the Junction; there is no train from Argendale till nearly two o'clock, and that would not bring me to Euston till quite

late at night. But, if I could catch the train that leaves Wharston Junction a little before one, I could manage it pretty easily."

"Surely to-morrow will do, Joan dear?"

"I would rather go at once, please; when a wrench is inevitable, the sooner it is over the better. I am a coward, and cannot face the misery of a last evening here. Besides, I perceive too clearly that, if I am to be of any use, my journey must not be deferred."

"If you *must* go indeed, I will go with you, and see you safely landed at Chestnut House."

And so, after a little further conversation, it was arranged. Joan's packing was hastily completed, many of her things necessarily remaining at Dunham Tower; an impromptu luncheon was improvised at a few minutes' notice; the carriage was ordered round almost immediately, and, in little more than an hour from the arrival of the unwelcome missive, Joan and Arthur were on their way to Wharston Junction,—a full five miles' drive. Mrs. Warrendale accompanied them to the station, feeling, as she said, too restless to remain quietly at home. She could only hope to be tired enough to go to sleep when she came home again.

The Junction was reached in good time, and, while Arthur went to take the tickets, Joan and the elder lady were left alone in the bare little waiting-room, and then, for a moment, Joan seemed fairly overcome.

"You are sure you *ought* to go?" said Mrs. Warrendale, for about the twentieth time. "Are you quite sure that you are doing a real kindness to your brother by helping him out of his scrapes? Might he not come out of the fray a stronger and a better man if he were left to fight it out by himself?"

But Joan shook her head. "Nothing, I greatly fear, will ever make him much stronger or much wiser. Still, if anything is to be done, it must be done by me, and there are Ada and the children to be thought of."

"You will come back and finish your holiday, when all is arranged?"

"I dare not promise! I dare not look forward! Dear Mrs. Warrendale, I feel as if a great deal of trouble awaited

me at my journey's end ; as if a time of trial were at hand."

"I do not wonder, you have been quite upset by this sudden and most unwelcome summons ; it is all so hurried that I cannot yet believe that I am to drive home alone."

"I am taking Arthur from you. I ought not to have allowed him to leave you ; but at the moment I felt as if the sudden journey unaccompanied would be too much for me. And yet I have been an unprotected female, and the guardian of others, for so many years ! How soon one grows selfish !"

"There is nothing selfish in your wishing to have Arthur with you, my dear. You have the first claim now. If he had not proposed taking charge of you, I am quite sure I should have suggested it. And he will be sure to find business of his own to attend to in town. And here he comes, and there is the signal for your train. Good-bye, my dear daughter, and remember that the sooner you can, consistently with duty, return to Dunham Tower, the better pleased I shall be."

Joan could not control her tears as the last farewells were spoken ; the mother of her affianced husband had become to her inexpressibly dear. But the train steamed up slowly to the platform, the carriage-doors were opened, and directly all was bustle and confusion. Sitting back in her compartment, she watched the solitary figure as it waved final adieux, while the train, once more in motion, began to get up speed, and was soon beyond the limits of the station. Not much could be said, for the lovers were not alone, but Joan felt greatly comforted by the presence of the one in all the world who had the right to care for her, and guard her from harm. It was a sweet and new experience not to have to look after herself, or her belongings. Yes ; even amid the apprehensions that pressed upon her so heavily, she felt how delightful it was to "belong" to Arthur, to have him at her side ready to help and guide her in every emergency.

She looked back at the mountains as long as they were in sight, and strained her neck from the carriage-window to catch the last glimpse of the bay, till at length Arthur

said in a whisper, "One would fancy you never meant to come back again, Joan!"

"And suppose I never did return! Suppose I never saw Dunham Tower, and the sands and rocks of bonnie Argendale again!" she answered, with a sudden and uncontrollable impulse, the tears shining in her eyes, and her lips trembling with suppressed emotion.

I am afraid Mr. Warrendale felt anything but kindly towards his fellow-passengers, so greatly he longed to be alone with his beloved one, and kiss the rising tears away. He could only murmur close to her ear—"We will not suppose anything so dreadful, my darling. I hope to bring you back again in two or three days; or, if that may not be, to be very soon preparing for your arrival at the Tower as Mrs. Warrendale. And perhaps things are not quite as bad with your brother as you anticipate. Mrs. Carisbroke may have made the worst of it. Ladies *do* sometimes exaggerate, you know."

"I only wish something may have been exaggerated, but really Ada writes so incoherently, that it is difficult to form any clear idea of what she means. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to comprehend that something of a most painful nature has transpired. Frank has done something, I am afraid—nay, I am almost sure—that places him within reach of the law; something that will bring disgrace upon our name."

"Nothing of the kind, I'll wager. Why, Joan, it quite delights me to discover that, after all, you are *not* a strong-minded woman, superior to the charming little weaknesses of your sex. You can worry yourself over a presentiment as ingeniously as the silliest little 'missy' that ever curled her ringlets."

Joan laughed. "So it pleases you to discover my weak points? Well! I am not sorry; I had begun to look upon myself as a sort of hard-headed, hard-hearted, uncompromising female dragon. But you cannot understand how it *does* harden, and, perhaps, to some extent, coarsen a woman to be forced, while she is yet in her teens, into manifold responsibilities; to be compelled to assume an almost absolute authority, and, above everything, to be obliged to plan, and arrange, and decide, and work, not

only for herself, but for all around her ! And I think it is in the nature of governesses to grow imperious ; they are always ordering this, and commanding that, reproving, admonishing, and advising, and continually in association with smaller minds than their own. A governess has the very fullest opportunities of becoming a self-satisfied, pedantic autocrat."

"That depends, I should say ! There are governesses and governesses. Some women ennoble the office, and some are ennobled, or, to speak more accurately, *elevated* by it. Nothing can lower a true gentlewoman, though among foolish and ignorant persons she may lose *caste* by accepting the position and receiving a salary. And there are others doubtless to whom it is actually a rise in life to take rank as recognised governess, teaching being at the same time one of the most ill-paid and most '*genteel*' of feminine occupations."

"Ah ! that word '*genteel* !' How it is perverted from its original signification ! To be *genteel* no longer means to be gentle in mind, in tone, and in manners, but to be fine-ladyish and affected, and generally above one's station. I always associate modern gentility with French polish, lacquer, and veneer."

"And so do I ; though I do not think I ever before considered the matter in so serious a light. But look ! that is the last view you will have of the Bekanks Fells and the Chalfonts Cliffs. We shall be in a deep cutting directly, and when we get out of it we shall have lost sight for the present of the Lake country and its southernmost borders. We shall soon find ourselves plunging into the manufacturing districts of Lancashire. This is a very fast train."

And so the journey proceeded ; every moment bore Joan farther and farther from the peaceful, lovely shores of happy Argendale, and nearer to the great city that was her destination—the city where she dreaded to find perplexity and distress, a revival of some of the harassing difficulties that she had fondly hoped were for ever past and over. Oh ! if Ada had only had the sense to express herself more clearly, and to write a little more legibly ; if she had omitted fewer words, and paid some small atten-

tion to punctuation, what a comfort it would have been ! Joan would then have had some distant notion of what awaited her ; she would then have been able to brace herself for the tasks required of her, to nerve herself for whatever shock she must sustain. As it was, she had only to be patient and trust, altogether certain that strength would be given her according to her day. But suspense is wearying even to Christian faith and fortitude.

Presently Joan confessed that her head ached badly, and that she would be glad to be silent and sit with closed eyes, so Arthur forebore any further conversation ; he still held her hand, under cover of her large travelling cape, but kept his thoughts to himself, hoping that Joan would really sleep after awhile.

Swiftly the fast train sped on its way—Wigan, with its water-butts, and Warrington with its smoke, were left behind ; the flatter lands of the south were traversed, and in turn had faded from sight—and in what seemed an incredibly short time to Arthur, who really had a very sound comfortable nap—Crewe, in all its confusion and ugliness, was reached, and they were soon on the way to Rugby.

From Rugby the train somehow lost time, and it was getting quite dark as it passed the frequent stations after Tring. The evening was closing in grey and dull, the clouds were low, the horizon veiled in heavy mists ; rain began to sprinkle, and by the time the Harrow platform was flashed by a thick drizzle was falling, and reducing everything around to a state of dirty, muddy drappiness. Oh, how dismal looked the hedges ! how black the trees, some of which had quite an autumn aspect ! how dingy the long rows of uniform houses and monotonous blocks of finished and unfinished buildings as the suburbs were approached ! The twilight had deepened so greatly during the last few miles of the journey that the lamps were being lighted at Willesden, and at Euston itself there was the usual nightly illumination.

Joan was wofully tired, and Hampstead was still to be gained, for it was quite out of the question to proceed to business till the morrow.

Arthur was lucky enough to find a comfortable easy

brougham; after the fatigues of the long journey he dreaded the slow pace and jog-trot jolt of an ordinary cab for himself, as well as for his companion; he never remembered being much more "done-up" in his life, and in spite of his slumbers between Warrington and Crewe he felt a yearning desire to find himself in bed. He had telegraphed from Wharstone Junction to his town-house, apprising the housekeeper of his speedy advent, and he had done the same to Chestnut House, on Joan's behalf. Of course, he saw her safely into her own territory, and properly tended by Mrs. Bray, before he turned his face towards Harley Street.

"I will be with you quite early in the morning," he said, as he prepared to take his leave; "as early as you please, and I only ask to be able to spare you in every particular. Leave me to manage with Mr. Carisbroke."

"Thank you, a thousand times! It is an inexpressible relief to know that you are at hand to help me; but I think I must act alone, in the beginning, at least. It is of the utmost consequence that I should make myself fully acquainted with all the circumstances of the dilemma, whatever it may be, and neither Frank nor Ada will speak openly to anyone but myself, and that only in confidence. You must let me go my own way, by myself, to-morrow. We had better not meet till evening—if you do not mind."

"Indeed, I do mind; but if you wish it—if you think it the wiser plan to make your first investigations without my interference—I will not press my assistance upon you. I want to be of *real* use to you, Joan dearest; and it seems to me that I can serve you best by acting entirely under your directions. Will you give me a cup of tea to-morrow evening about six? Then, when you have reported progress, we can confer together. And as Mrs. Grundy is pretty sure to concern herself on our behalf, I suppose I must not make too long or too frequent visits to you in your own house. Can you not bring Mistress Ada back with you to play propriety? You can give her a hint to disappear from time to time that we may have our own conversation."

"How kindly you take thought for me, Arthur! You are quite right, but I am not at all sure that it will be

expedient to make a chaperone of my sister-in-law, nor am I by any means certain that she is available, for she has five children, and two of them are babies. However, that does not matter; Mrs. Bray will do quite as well; she has far more discretion than Ada, and we never treat her as a servant."

When Arthur was gone, and Joan was left alone in the old familiar rooms, she felt as if the events of the last few weeks—especially of the last day or two—were but parts of a fantastic dream. She had had all sorts of sweet, blissful visions—a succession of pleasant experiences; and now she was slowly awaking in the silent, sombre parlour, which she seemed never to have left. There were the faded carpet, the old mended table-cloth, the ancient side-board, the school-globes, and the practising piano, just as she had seen them day after day for the last twelve years of her life. It was difficult to believe in Dunham Tower; still more difficult to believe in herself as a betrothed maiden—really and truly engaged to marry Arthur Warrendale!

Presently Mrs. Bray came in with the tea-tray, and with her entered from the kitchen an appetising odour of something more substantial than toast and bread-and-butter.

"I have got some ham and eggs cooked, my dear Miss Joan," said the good woman, as she quietly and deftly spread the table. "You must be dreadfully tired, and almost starved to death."

"Not at all," replied Joan, with a sickly smile. "I had some biscuits and sherry-and-water, and there were delicious sandwiches, only I could not eat them. I was very much afraid of being in for one of my bad sick-head-aches."

"I knew your head ached by the dark circles round your eyes. I can't say you look much the better for your visit, but I dare say you are sadly put about, having to come back all of a sudden. I hope, my dear, there's nothing the matter?"

"I am afraid something is wrong at Eldon Place. I had a letter from Mrs. Carisbroke this morning, imploring me to return instantly."

"This morning! Indeed, you did not lose much time, Miss Joan. Would not to-morrow have done?"

"Perhaps it might; but I could not bear the suspense of waiting; and, since I had to leave my friends, the sooner the better."

"And very kind it was of Mr. Warrendale to come along with you! But, no doubt, he has business of his own in town, and he must get very tired of the country, I should say, a young gentleman of his age, and used to travelling abroad, and going about in great cities. Still, it was very kind of him to take charge of you, wasn't it, Miss Joan, dear?"

"Very kind."

And Joan felt as if she would rather not talk any more about Arthur Warrendale's "kindness." She quickly perceived that her lover's attentions were set down to pure benevolence, that the last thing Mrs. Bray thought of was any such tie as now subsisted between her and the master of Dunham Tower. The good lady as she talked made it clearly apparent that she looked upon Mr. Warrendale as a young man who might make what the world would call "a most excellent marriage"; that is to say, might wed youth, beauty, family, and fortune. It never seemed to cross Mrs. Bray's mind that Joan herself could be eligible for such promotion. She loved her mistress dearly, and respected her most entirely; she even admired her as a woman of a thousand; but from long habitude she had learned to regard her as a predestined old maid, and the lifelong head and ruler of the establishment, with no further possibilities in store. Miss Brenda might marry, and Miss Ruby certainly would; but that Miss Joan should ever change her maiden-estate had never entered her imagination. Mr. Warrendale might have visited at Chestnut House morning, noon, and night, and it would never have occurred to good Mrs. Bray that he came there on her dear Miss Joan's account.

Not much was said, and yet Joan understood the house-keeper's impressions, and the comprehension thereof caused her no little pain. For, as she said to herself afterwards, "*I myself seem to be entirely out of the question.*"

Mrs. Bray does not think of me as a woman, among other women, to be wooed and won and wedded. She speaks as if I were *years* instead of months older than Arthur; as if I had long ago contentedly subsided into an 'unappropriated blessing,' with no thought, no ambition, save living the life of a schoolmistress, discharging my duty in the same, and making decent provision for old age. And am I not half-foolish to imagine that the promised-land of happy married life can be for me—*for me!*"

And then Mrs. Bray began to discourse on all that had happened since her ladies had left home, and to talk of the delightful letter she had received from Miss Ruby, and to wonder whether the "darling child" might not find some one to fall in love with her at Guernsey. Miss Macdonald had brothers, Mrs. Bray understood, and one of them was a very nice young gentleman, of fine property and good position.

And Joan marvelled greatly how Mrs. Bray could have "understood" anything of the sort. It had not once crossed her own mind that this Guernsey expedition was at all likely to affect Ruby's future fortunes. And yet, Ruby was no longer a child; many a girl of her age was an affianced wife, and such rare, pure loveliness as hers must needs bring many a lover to her feet! How absurd she was! But somehow she did not like to think of her child as a marriageable woman, in whose heart new and absorbing interests might at any time spring up.

And when Mrs. Bray came in to take away the remnants of the supper, to which Joan had done but scant justice—apologising for the absence of the customary parlourmaid, who was away on her holiday, as well as the cook—she lingered, as if she wanted to say something of consequence.

"Something has just struck me!" she said, waiting for Joan's permission to proceed. Mrs. Bray was one of the best and most faithful of confidential servants, but some curious notions sometimes struck her, and when they did so she was impelled to communicate them as speedily as might be. Happily, she had invariably the discretion to communicate them to her mistress, and to no one else; for she had the strongest belief in Joan's sagacity, and

not much opinion of her own, unless it were a question of cookery, needlework, or household management.

"And what has struck you, Mrs. Bray?" was Joan's reply, while she with difficulty repressed a yawn.

"Why! I was thinking what an excellent match for Miss Ruby this Mr. Warrendale would be! I like the looks of him. He'll make a first-rate husband, I'll warrant; and he wants a wife. A fine place like his ought to have a mistress."

"His mother keeps his house—that is to say, she heads his table and receives his visitors," returned Joan, scarcely knowing what to say.

"Ah, yes! and a very nice lady she is, no doubt; but a wife and a mother are two things, and a gentleman like Mr. Warrendale ought to marry; and where would he find a sweeter, lovelier young lady than our pretty dear? She would grace a finer place than Dunham Tower, she would! She ought to marry to her carriage-and-pair, and to a coronet; she would make a beautiful 'My lady'!"

"Now, really, Mrs. Bray, you are talking very foolishly. I hope you will not be putting silly notions into Ruby's head. I do not want her to think of marrying just yet; she is quite a child."

"So she is, the pretty lamb! But she'll be seventeen next birthday, and when the Prince comes by she'll wake up all of a sudden, and find out that she is a woman grown. And somehow, I can't help thinking that if Mr. Warrendale saw her, he might be the Prince, and fancy her for his Princess."

"Really, Mrs. Bray, you are quite absurd!" And Joan, with a certain air of displeasure, turned down the gas, and prepared to go upstairs.

"Well, now, I never saw her look like that!" soliloquised Mrs. Bray, as she followed her mistress from the room. "I'd no idea of taking a liberty, I am sure, and she always let me talk to her pretty freely. But I suppose she is just tired to death, and she is put out at being brought home all of a sudden like this, and no wonder! And, then, she is not quite as young as she was when I first came to live at Chestnut House, in poor Miss Martin's and Mr. Carisbroke's time."

CHAPTER XLII.

MRS. CARISBROKE AT HOME.

IN spite of discomfiture and anxiety, Joan was soon soundly asleep, for she was utterly worn out with the fatigues and the excitements of the last twenty-four hours. And so profound were her slumbers that her first awakening was caused by the noise the servants made in arranging the room below, when, looking at her watch, she perceived it was almost nine o'clock.

Hurriedly she sprang up, and began to dress with all possible dispatch, for she had settled over night that she would be on her way to Ada quite as early as half-past nine, and Mr. and Mrs. Carisbroke lived now in Westbourne Park, which is, as everybody knows, a good long step from Hampstead Heath. Ah! how different was all about her from that which had been so recently! As she opened her eyes and beheld the old, familiar room—the one she had shared with Meliora in her illness, and with Ruby afterwards, for now these nine years past—she could scarcely believe that her late experiences were not a dream. She moved about, putting on her garments and arranging her hair, with a strange, dreary sense of unreality; either she was dreaming still, and would presently awake in her pretty pink chamber at Dunham Tower, and would look out on the green, shady park, where the sleek cattle fed beneath the umbrageous elms and beeches, with the shining estuary and the great Fells and mountain peaks beyond; or else—or *else*—that evening on the lovely Earnseat shore, that mysteriously-lost betrothal-ring, and even Arthur's love, were but dreams that melted away in common daylight!—the mere unsubstantial fabrics of a sweet delusion!

But by the time she was ready to go down, Joan had begun to have clear perceptions of the realities of her position. She had been suddenly recalled from Argendale; she *was* Arthur Warrendale's affianced wife, and he, too, was in London, and would be with her no later than that

evening. Meanwhile, there lay before her a great and unexplained trouble, with which she must cope without loss of time, and to the best of her ability.

She dressed herself ready for her journey before she left her room. She wanted to catch a certain omnibus that would take her a good distance on her way, and it was due at a given point in less than a quarter of an hour. She found Mrs. Bray quite ready with her breakfast, and most desirous that she should make a good meal before addressing herself to the day's difficulties.

"Now, really, Miss Joan, dear," she expostulated, when Joan, after a single cup of coffee and one strip of dry toast, was rising from the table, "it's downright foolish—if you will forgive me for saying so—to go out on such a breakfast as that! I don't believe any one is either very wise or very patient with an empty stomach. Fasting folks that have to face trouble are no better off than soldiers going to fight without any sort of weapon. Just sit down and eat that egg."

"Indeed I cannot; and I shall lose my omnibus if I linger. I slept well, and I am quite rested; you need not be anxious on my behalf. No; I cannot eat any more; I am not at all hungry; but be sure to have tea ready for six o'clock, and you may bring out some of your dainties then, for my appetite will perhaps have improved, and, besides, I expect Mr. Warrendale."

And before Mrs. Bray could again interfere, Joan was in the hall, and escaping into the drive. It was a dull and rather sultry morning; it had ceased to rain, but the water still lay in pools on the soaked gravel, and the trees and shrubs on either side dripped dismally on the turf and walk. The Heath, too, was very wet, and even muddy; and the usual prospect of the distant city, with its myriads of buildings, its dim towers and spires, and its great cloud-like dome, was invisible, wrapped in sullen, impervious mists that gathered thickly in the foreground. It must have rained heavily during the night. Joan wondered whether the sun was shining at Argendale, and whether Mrs. Warrendale and Margery had looked, or were going to look, for the lost "Circle"—*her* ring, as Arthur had called it, trying to impress upon her the

fact of her ownership, which, somehow, she failed to realise.

But she had to hasten her steps, for the minutes were passing by, and every moment she expected to hear the horn of the coming omnibus. She was surprised not to see it when she crossed into the broad road, along which it must advance from its starting-point, so she walked slowly on, looking back continually, and still no omnibus, till she had almost reached the upper end of the High Street. Then she met the baker's man, who served her regularly with bread, and she stopped to ask him if the omnibus was not unusually late. He informed her that it had passed down the street some time before; that it now started for town fifteen minutes earlier; but there would be another 'bus in less than half an hour, and would not Miss Carisbroke go and sit down in the shop till it came up? Joan thanked the man, but decided not to wait; a few yards further would bring her to a cab-stand, and she would drive straight to Laburnum Place, the name of the two semi-detached villas, one of which her brother had rented for the last three years. She was beginning to feel nervously anxious to arrive at her destination, and to know the worst that awaited her.

It was almost eleven o'clock when at last the cab stopped at the door of No. 2. No. 1 was a remarkably trim-looking little residence, and made No. 2 look all the worse, by force of contrast. No. 1 boasted clean curtains and bright windows, a neatly shaven strip of turf inside the railings, and spotless steps and flagged pathway. A few flowers bloomed gaily in the tiny border, and a very respectable pussy-cat blinked comfortably on the window-ledge. No. 2, alas! displayed a miserably-neglected—not to say disreputable appearance; the windows were dull and undraped, the dirty blinds drawn up awry, the railings broken, the small garden-plot flowerless, and the doorsteps sadly in need of a good cleaning.

Joan rang the bell; there was a great jangle of wires, but the pull was evidently broken. She waited about half a minute, and then made a second attempt. After a considerable delay, during which footsteps within were distinctly audible, the door was opened on the chain, and a

slatternly, shock-headed girl, capless, but with a prodigious "fringe," put her grimy face to the aperture, and leisurely surveyed the new arrival.

"What do you want?" inquired the lady of the "fringe"—which, however, resembled nothing earthly so much as a bull's mane!

"I wish to see Mrs. Carisbroke; she expects me," was Joan's reply.

"What's yer name, please?" was the next query, with the door still strictly guarded.

"I am Miss Carisbroke, from Chestnut House; you may let me in."

"That wasn't she as the missis looked for; *she* said 'Miss Jones.'"

"It is all right; my name is *Joan* Carisbroke."

"I think I'd as lief tell the missis before I let you in; she don't want to see nobody, hardly."

And before Joan could expostulate the damsel had fled, and was heard running slip-shod towards the back of the house. There was nothing for it but to wait patiently; but I must confess that the visitor felt somewhat disgusted at having come so far, and at such infinite inconvenience, to be kept waiting on the doorstep, to contemplate the dank greenness of the stones, and a pool or two of recently-spilt milk. In a very short time, however, the damsel returned, the chain was let down with a clatter, and the door was opened into a dismal, dingy little hall, that appeared not to have been scoured within the memory of man.

"It's all right, she say!" cried the girl, triumphantly; "but I were told to let in none but you; and how *was* I to know as you had two names? Come along; missis is in the dining-room."

Joan followed her guide to the end of the dirty hall, down two dark, crooked steps, especially designed for the convenience of any one who might wish to break his neck, and into a small back-parlour, which did duty for the "dining-room" at No. 2, Laburnum Place.

And *such* a dining-room! In the first place, there was not space for more than four people to dine, however ingeniously packed. The pattern had utterly disappeared

from the once gaudy carpet, the tablecloth was covered with crumbs, spots of ink and grease, and plenty of spilt milk; the table itself was laden with a miscellaneous display of articles more useful than ornamental. There were the remnants of a late breakfast on a rusty tray, a work-basket boiling over with unmended socks and stockings, a tattered picture-book, with dog-eared leaves, several battered dolls, a quantity of gnawed crusts, a jug with a broken spout and no handle, a hair-brush and comb in a state which is better undescribed, and a bottle of strongly-perfumed hair-oil, uncorked, and in imminent danger of adding to the various designs or tessellations in which the unfortunate table-cover rejoiced.

Ada sat on a broken rocking-chair, nursing a puny infant, still in its night-dress, and wrapped about with a remarkably dirty shawl, an elder child—the *late* baby—sat at her feet, with a paper of sweets in her hand, and a pale, smeared face; three elder children were quarrelling and wrangling over an unhappy, half-starved kitten, that mewed piteously, as if beseeching somebody to release it from its merciless little enemies, or put a period to its miserable existence. Mrs. Carisbroke was screaming in a shrill, vixenish tone at her offspring as her sister-in-law entered, bidding them behave themselves that minute on pain of being locked up in the coal-cellar, where the man that ate up naughty children lived!

The children took no heed; the mother was evidently a cipher in the midst of her family, and the uproar was, at that instant, increased by the weak cries of the sickly infant.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" moaned Ada, piteously. "I'm so sorry, Joan; but I can't make them quiet! They'll be the death of me, the wicked, inhuman little creatures. Franky, if you don't leave off pulling Dolfy's hair I'll beat you as long as my arm has a bit of strength in it." Then changing her tone, "Come, now! be good lads, and Auntie Joan will give you sixpence to buy goodies with!"

"Sixpence each?" shouted Franky and Dolf, in concert, while the third child, Regy, a black-eyed, gaunt-featured boy of five, lisped, "Thixpenth each, mum-ma?" Joan had an excessive horror of bribery in any shape; but just then she was willing to compound for peace at any price.

She turned to her hopeful nephews, and said, "I will give you sixpence each to do what you like with if you are good children!"

Three dirty little paws were immediately outstretched; but Aunt Joan drew up her stately figure, and answered, "I said if you were good children!"

"Give us the tizzies now, and we'll be good *afterwards*," cried Master Frank.

"No," said Aunt Joan, resolutely; "you must be good children first, and receive the reward afterwards."

"How long will it be till '*afterwards*?' " inquired the hopeful youth.

"I cannot exactly say—till mamma and I have had all our talk. But you must be very quiet, and let that poor little kitty alone."

For even as the conversation proceeded, Regy was swinging the luckless animal round and round by its tail. Joan exclaimed with sudden indignation, as the creature howled in anguish, "How dare you be so cruel! How would you like me to hold you up by the hair of your head? Ada! how can you let them torture the poor thing!"

"I got it on purpose for a plaything for them," replied Ada, sulkily. "Dear me, Joan, you are quite an old maid, making such a fuss about a cat! It's a nasty, spiteful little beast, though, and I think I'll have it drowned. It scratched Ethie the other day most dreadfully, and she was only warming it at the kitchen fire."

"She was pretending to roast it like the meat," remarked Franky; "but it had better be killed; we are all tired of it now. It would be fun for me and Dolf to drown it. We may, mayn't we, ma?"

Meanwhile Ada was trying to clear a chair for Joan's occupation; but it was no easy matter, for the baby's basin full of soapsuds occupied one seat, the coffee-pot another, a heap of dirty towels a third, while the fourth was covered with a heterogeneous mass of rubbish. Joan looked about her, and took in the situation as best she could.

"Ada," she said, at last, quietly, but in that firm tone which generally overawed the most heedless and defiant of her pupils, "you have something of importance to say to me; it is impossible to converse here. I replied to your

summons at great inconvenience to myself, and I am naturally impatient to know what is the matter. Shall we not go with the baby into another room?"

Ada looked helplessly around. "No, we can't talk here," she asserted; "we never can till they are all in bed, and if I leave them I never know what will happen. They've set each other on fire before now, and once they set the house on fire, and once——"

"But there is no fire in the room now," interrupted Joan, with some impatience, it must be confessed; "and you surely do not allow them to have lucifers? Cannot your maid take charge of them for a little while?"

"Oh, they are worse with the girl than with any one! I can't tell you the trouble I've had with girls, Joan; I've changed and changed again till I am sick of it; this one is honest, I think—the last one pawned the frying-pan!—and she don't drink, nor use bad language; but she will not do more than she likes, and she thumps the children when they aggravate her, and calls them names."

Joan privately thought that the damsel with the hirsute frontal appendage must "like" to do very little in the way of sweeping and dusting, not to mention such feats as scouring and scrubbing, judging from the appearance of the house. But she could not argue the question just then. It seemed to her that she might sit among the noisy children and listen to Ada's domestic grievances till it was time to set out again for Hampstead Heath. She was beginning to feel desperate.

"Ada," she said, calmly, "if you have nothing to say to me I will go home, for my head aches, and this noise distracts me; and I will thank you in future to refrain from sending me letters of alarm when I am two hundred miles away from home."

"Ah! now you are going to be unkind!" and Ada melted into tears. "We are in a heap of trouble, and if you can't help us nobody else can! I'm sure I don't know what is to become of us! Oh, dear! I wish I had not been such a fool as to marry a man without a penny of private fortune. Anna Matilda—only her husband insists on her being called Annie now—used to say to me, 'Ah, Ada, you'll rue the day that ever you saw Frank Caris-

broke !' and rue it I do. Heaven knows that I have done ever since Franky there was born. 'You'll sup sorrow by spoonfuls,' says ma before she died ; and I've done more than sup it—I've swallowed it down by pailfuls, I have. 'As you've made your bed you must lie on it !' says that pert, stuck-up minx, Mariana, my younger sister, who has gone and married a man that seems to turn all he touches into money. And as for the Pattersons, they roll in wealth, though they stick to the retail trade, and seem in no wise ashamed of it."

"Why should they be ashamed of an honest business that brings them in a decent income? I am not ashamed of schoolkeeping ; I should not be ashamed of an apple-stall if it were God's will that I should get my living by it. But we have something else to talk about now. Once more, Ada, *why* am I here this morning?"

Ada looked dejectedly at her lawless, uncleanly brood.

"If they kill each other they must !" she said, with an air of pious resignation. "Come with me to my room ; I'll soon hush baby off to sleep. And perhaps you'll pick up Ethelinda and carry her upstairs. She's no weight, poor little mite ; she's had fits ever since she was born, and that keeps her dwindling. She will be as quiet as a mouse with something to suck at ; and I've got a handful of peppermint and raspberry candy upstairs."

Joan was about to remark on the impolicy of stuffing a sickly child with unwholesome "goodies," but she recollected that the necessary explanation was not yet begun, and decided to start no further topic until her suspense should be ended. Without any more ado she took the puny Ethelinda in her arms, while the little one shrieked wildly, and kicked and struggled with surprising energy in token of displeasure at the stranger's touch. Her mother tried to pacify her, promising her "a big lump of almond toffy" that she had in her drawer upstairs ; but Joan simply opened the room-door and proceeded to bear off her squalling, wriggling burden. Ada followed with the baby, but paused to turn the key on the rebel crew she left behind, "for," she explained, "if I don't lock them in they'll be all over the house, and come drumming at my door, and we shall not be one bit the quieter !

There, they can't get out, so they may shout and roar till they are tired, and we shall not hear much of them. And they can't do much mischief, unless they smash the windows, and perhaps they will not think of that."

Joan wondered how the occupants of No. 1 bore with the noisy inmates of No. 2; but, true to her resolve to speak of nothing but the subject of Ada's incomprehensible letter, she made no remark, and presently found herself in Mrs. Carisbroke's own room, with Ethelinda sucking at a huge lump of treacly toffy at her feet. The baby, after a little fretting and whimpering, slept peacefully on its mother's breast. Then Joan returned once more to the charge: "*Now*, Ada, what is all this fuss about? And where is Frank?"

"I don't quite know; I fancy he has gone abroad. Gentlemen do go abroad, you know, when they get into a little trouble, leaving their poor wives to bear all the burden at home."

"How long has he been gone?"

"He went just a week ago; said he had sudden and pressing business in Paris, and promised to write as soon as he got over the water. I didn't think much of it, I am so used to his whims; but I hoped he would soon be back—he left me with so little money, and two or three of the tradespeople clamouring for their accounts. Well, Joan! it's my private opinion that he will *never* come back! He's just deserted his wife and children, and that's the top and bottom of it."

"Did he write, as he promised?"

"Yes, he wrote; but not from Calais or from Boulogne. His letter was dated from Liverpool, and I got it the very morning after he went away. He was sailing that evening, he said—sailing for New York, where there was a first-rate appointment waiting for him, and as soon as he was settled he would send for me and the children; but for reasons of his own I was to keep my own counsel, and say nothing about his plans. Only when people asked where he was gone to I was to tell them he was on the Continent, at Paris, and going on to Geneva."

"And did you tell them so?"

"To be sure I did! Wives must always do as their hus-

bands bid them ; but la ! I forgot, you're an old maid and don't understand married life."

"I understand that people should tell the truth whether married or single ; but we need not discuss that point at present. Is Frank's evasion your only trouble ? You certainly said something about going to prison. Has he run away to escape from his creditors ?"

"That's one thing, I suppose. He owes money right and left ; he never did have any luck, you know, poor fellow ; he had no father to start him in life and back him up, as Richard Patterson had ; but Richard don't take that into account."

"What has Richard Patterson to do with it ?"

"He has everything to do with it, and that's where the trouble is. Frank has been and done something that he ought not to have done. I don't mean to screen him, I'm sure, for I'm just disgusted, and ashamed that I ever changed my name to Carisbroke ; but Richard need not be so spiteful."

"Will you tell me plainly, Ada, what Frank has done, and how Richard Patterson is concerned in the business ?"

"Well, he has drawn a bill, or a *cheque*, or something of the kind—you know I never did understand business !—and put Richard's name to it, without asking his leave, or saying a word about it. And now the bill, or whatever it is, is due, and it is brought to Richard to pay it, and *he won't !*"

"Do you mean to tell me that my brother Frank has *forged* Richard Patterson's acceptance ?" said Joan, turning deadly pale.

"That's it, I suppose. That is what Richard called it when he came here on Sunday like a ravening lion."

"Tell me all you know about it."

"There is not much to tell. I only know that Frank has had the greatest difficulty in making both ends meet ever since he went into business for himself, and the Company he had to do with got into hot water. At first I hoped we were going to do well, and make a proper appearance before the world. I had some decent dresses, and we went together to *Oetzmann's*, and bought some new furniture—and paid for it, too ! A drawing-room suite we had,

and a pianoforte, and a wardrobe with a plate-glass panel ! But in a very few months Frank said he was in straits again. Some speculations that promised fair to bring in 10 or 15 per cent.—whatever that may be!—came to nothing; and so things went from bad to worse, and Frank, I'm sorry to say, took to drinking a great deal more stimulant than was good for him. Well! not to make a long story of it, he needed money very badly to tide over one particular time when 'bills' were due; and thinking that what he wanted would be sure to come in, he just drew a 'bill'—at least, I think it was a *bill*!—and put Richard's name to it. And Richard swears he'll prosecute him for forgery, and punish him like any common thief! I am sure the way he behaved himself here last Sunday—and Annie was quite as bad!—was utterly disgraceful, going on and abusing Frank before his innocent wife and children as if he were just a common felon!"

"I am sadly afraid, Ada, that is what Frank really is. If he has forged Richard Patterson's acceptance—I still hope there is some mistake—Richard can prosecute him and expose him in the public papers."

"Richard must catch him before he can prosecute him. He is half-way to America now, thank goodness! And I'm sure, if he exposes his own brother-in-law, and his cousin to boot—as he is, you know, and there I was terribly deceived—he deserves to be hanged."

"Why did you send for me?"

"Why! who else could I send for? Uncle Ben is the only one of the family except Richard who has any money or any sense. I would not humble myself to ask a favour of Marian's husband to save my life. And Uncle Ben has given us the cold shoulder of late years, as perhaps you know. There was no one but you to fly to, or I would not have troubled you, you may be certain."

"And what can I do?"

"You can ask that, and you are Frank's own sister, and the rich woman of the family! Why, I haven't ten pounds in the world, and all my jewellery is gone, and we sold the drawing-room *suite* we had from *Oetzmann's* some months ago, and the rent is in arrears, and the butcher's bill, and the grocer's; and the gas and the water are both

cut off, and the milk won't call after Saturday unless the account for the last half-year is settled ! And Sophia's wages are over-due, and she declares she is going to-night ; and what can I do that was never brought up to drudgery—I, with this baby in my arms, and that other child that can hardly go alone, and those three great rampagious boys that mind me no more than the wind ? ”

“Ada,” said Joan, gravely, “I am very sorry for you ; but you must remember that I, as well as Frank, have had to earn my living ; and I have my sisters to consider. I can do nothing, promise nothing, till I have well pondered the whole miserable affair. You have some money, you say ? Pay your servant her wages at once, and keep her for the present if she will stay. Meanwhile, I am going to Richard Patterson. From all I have heard of him he will tell me nothing but the truth. I must understand the business from first to last before I can undertake to meddle in it.”

“Well, we'll have a bit of dinner, and talk it over further.”

“No, thank you ; I cannot dine just now. I must see Richard Patterson without delay. There is no time to be lost ; perhaps it is already too late. The affair may even now be in the hands of the police.”

CHAPTER XLIII.

COUSIN JOAN.

“He is well paid that is well satisfied.”

THE day had brightened during Joan's sojourn at Laburnum Place, but she felt even heavier of heart than when crossing the Heath several hours before. She had not seen Mr. Richard Patterson since his wedding-day, but she had heard of him more than once through Frank,

and, in spite of evident misrepresentation, liked extremely what she heard. She shrank now from making his acquaintance, and half dreaded the reception she might meet with, but much more feared the explanations that must ensue. In Tottenham Court Road she felt suddenly sick and faint, and then she recollected that she had taken scarcely any food that day: so she turned into the first confectioner's shop she came to, and ordered a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

Having rested and taken refreshment, she felt much better and bolder, and readier to pay the visit in Hampstead Road, for Mr. and Mrs. Richard Patterson still lived at their house of business; the elder Patterson and the head of the firm yet carrying on the well-known establishment in the Borough—"Patterson's Own" being more popular and bringing in larger profits than ever.

A few minutes brought Joan to the shop-door, and without daring to think about it, she entered, and saw Mr. Patterson busy at a little desk, pen in hand, and evidently making entries. A young man in a white apron politely inquired what he should do for her, at the same time bringing into full view a fine pair of young ducklings and a dish of newly-printed pats of firm, golden, sweet, fresh butter. Joan replied that she wished to see Mr. Patterson.

The shopman bowed, and, going to the farther end of the shop, spoke respectfully to his master. Richard Patterson looked up. He was stouter and redder than when Joan had seen him last; but he was little changed. He looked as sensible and as kind-hearted as ever, and his visitor could scarcely think of him as behaving like "a ravening lion" at Laburnum Place!

He came forward with a courteous inclination, and then waited to hear what the business might be that summoned him from his ledger. "I see you do not remember me," said Joan, feeling almost as much ashamed of herself as if she had been accused of forging an "acceptance."

"I cannot say I have the pleasure," he replied, "and yet I have surely seen you before! I met you a long time ago, did I not? Ah, now I have it; it was on the occasion of my wedding, and you are one of the Miss Carisbrokes."

"I am Joan Carisbroke, your far-away cousin, and I have just come from Laburnum Place, where I have heard a miserable story, in which your name figures most sadly. My sister-in-law summoned me, I scarcely know why, to her aid. I must confess I cannot clearly comprehend her account of the transaction; I therefore come to you."

"You must be more than ordinarily clever, if you can comprehend any account of Ada Carisbroke, for she has not the gift of seeing things reasonably or clearly, and her statements generally are provokingly unconnected and inaccurate. But do not stand, Miss Carisbroke; will you walk into my parlour, behind the shop? We can converse privately and undisturbed there; my wife and our children went yesterday to the seaside, and I should be with them now, but for this unhappy affair. What have you learned from Mrs. Carisbroke, may I ask?"

Joan told what she had heard as exactly and as succinctly as she could. Mr. Patterson heard her to the end, and then said quietly, "It is pretty much as Ada relates it; only she omits one most important circumstance—this is not the first time that her husband has—made use—of my name! There was a similar transaction three years ago, and Frank Carisbroke was then as completely at my mercy as he is now."

Joan turned a shade paler than before, and knew not what to answer. She had had her fears for Frank for some time; many of his doings had puzzled her exceedingly; but anything so terrible as this she had not anticipated. "Do you mean," she faltered at length, "that my brother has actually offended in the same way before—that he committed the same fault then as now?"

"Precisely the same; only the sum I had to pay was a far smaller one than the present amount."

"What could have incited him to such mad wickedness, and having once escaped consequences to dare them again?"

"I begin to think I have made a mistake in letting him go unpunished; there are some natures that are the worse, instead of the better, for leniency, some characters with whom severity is the truest mercy. I don't wish to pain

you, Miss Carisbroke, but I am afraid your brother Frank is one of them."

"I do not know what to think. Of course, in the former case he made professions of penitence?"

"His penitence, his remorse was, or *seemed*, quite pitiable. He implored me with tears to spare him, to pardon his grave offence, to give him one more opportunity of retrieving himself. I must say I felt no great confidence in his expressions of sorrow, nor in his reiterated promises for the future. I distrusted his principles; he had, I feared, no sense whatever of integrity, and his companions in business, as well as in pleasure, were not of the sort to do him any good. Still, I was sorry for him on many accounts, and his wife was my Annie's own sister. Ada was upstairs, too, with a three-days-old baby when the storm burst, and Frank had the madness to rush to her bedside, and proclaim his ruin and disgrace, in his usual maudlin, despairing style. Ada's life was in great danger for more than a week, for fever was the result of the imprudent excitement to which she was subjected, and the babe died. Frank absolutely grovelled in his abject misery, and once again he vowed—nay, he *swore* to amend his ways, and tread henceforward the paths of rectitude and honour, if only he might have another chance! He did not deserve it, he confessed, he merited only the utmost penalty of his misdeeds—penal servitude for the term of his natural life would not be too much for his offences. Only, for the sake of those who must suffer for his crime, the innocent for the guilty, he implored me to have compassion, and let him escape the just consequences of his sin. Well, Miss Carisbroke, though I'm 'only a tradesman,' as Mrs. Carisbroke has frequently reminded my wife, I have the heart of a man, and I am a husband, and a father; so after a little hesitation—which I must say, was more than half a pretence, only I was afraid of letting him off too easily—I forgave him, and consented that the past should be condoned on condition of a sterling reformation for the future. And it was quite as much for your sake, Miss Carisbroke, as for Ada's and the little ones', that I acted as I did, and forebore my just retribution."

"For my sake? I did not know that you had any clear remembrance of my existence."

"Yes, I had! Frank, in his better moods, had told me, how from girlhood you had toiled and striven to live honestly and honourably by your own exertions; how you were the stay and main prop of your family; how you kept the household together; how you were a true Christian gentlewoman, doing your duty in the station to which God had called you. And I heard of you and your sisters from other sources; during these last few years, the school at Chestnut House has got a famous name. I shall send you all my daughters, one after another, as they grow older, I promise you—that is, if you will have them—for you will make good useful women of them and not fine ladies, I am positive. Yes; it was partly—and a good deal for your own sake, that I declined to bring the name of Carisbroke into public disgrace."

"I thank you exceedingly, Mr. Patterson; you have been very merciful to my poor misguided brother, very kind to his family, who, unfortunately, must reap some of the fruits of his evil sowing. But, in the present instance,—how will you act now?"

"Oh, that is more than I can tell you at this minute, for I do not know myself. I cannot act as I did before. In the first place, it is due to society not to pass over such shameful transgression; if Frank Carisbroke go scot-free again, as he did before, he will only be encouraged to defraud afresh—no one can tell to what extent! Others will have no motive to mercy, and he will suffer the full penalty of his crime. But that is not all; I might say I would leave to those who claim no kin with him the office of executioner, and let him once more escape; this, however, is not possible. In this case, Frank has been a fool as well as a villain, and he has implicated others who are not likely to hold their tongues. It is a very confused piece of business, and I really cannot explain it to you, for I do not as yet myself see the rights or the wrongs of it. I have spoken to a lawyer whom I can trust, and we are going into the matter to-morrow morning. Business is getting a little slacker, or I don't know how I could spare the time."

"How much money have you got to pay for Frank?"

"One thousand pounds! It was only two hundred before. Miss Carisbroke, when your brother left London, he fully intended never to return; he had laid all his plans, and he carried off nearly the whole sum. Ada said he was gone to Paris on business; I knew better than that! I taxed her with her falsehood, and by dint of a little storming I got the truth out of her. He has levanted to the other side of the Atlantic; he is well on his way to New York by this time."

"She told me that, without scruple, Frank had laid his commands on her to deceive and mislead all inquirers; but I suppose she did not think it necessary to lie to me. Will he be pursued?"

"I cannot certainly say that he will, or that he will not. As I told you, the matter is not entirely in my hands; if I hold my peace, there are others whom we cannot expect to be so considerate. And a thousand pounds is a great deal to sacrifice, when one has a growing-up family of one's own."

"It is indeed, and I do not think you ought to sacrifice it. But if the money is the only difficulty, I think I can manage to refund it, in three or more instalments. I am not sure that I could not at once—that is, in a few days—procure it for you."

"Ah, but the money is not the sole difficulty, there are complications. Look you here, Miss Carisbroke; you seem to me like a woman of business, so I'll put it before you as clearly as I can."

And then Mr. Patterson entered into a rather lengthy explanation, which it is not here needful to repeat. Suffice it to say, that at the end of an hour's converse, Joan was not very much the wiser; she only understood that Frank had an accomplice in his fraud, and that Mr. Patterson was not alone in his liabilities. Not one charge, but two—probably more—might be preferred against Frank Carisbroke, who had "run the country," to escape alike from his creditors and from the clutches of the law. She took down some notes, determined to tell the whole truth to Arthur that very evening. Then she thanked Mr. Patterson for his great kindness and courtesy, and rose to take her leave,

But Richard would not allow it. "No, no," he cried, "you are not going out of my house, Miss Carisbroke, till you've had a good comforting cup of tea, and something to eat. You look like a ghost, you do, indeed! I am only too proud to entertain you, for we do call cousins, you know, and blood is thicker than water, as we Pattersons believe—though we are tradespeople, *and* Nonconformists! Take off your bonnet now, and put up your feet on that sofa and rest, while I go and tell my cook what I want. I've only one maid at home, the other two have gone with the mistress to Hunstanton."

And before Joan could remonstrate she was left alone in the comfortable cool parlour, and the sofa looked inviting certainly after all the fatigues of the morning, and the long, hurried journey of the day before. The room was really *well* furnished; everything in it was substantial and handsome, without any attempt at display, and it was scrupulously neat and clean. The chairs and tables, and the capacious sideboard shone with something else than mere French polish; the cheap ornaments and paper-mats and artificial flowers that from Frank's account Joan was prepared to find, were simply conspicuous by their absence; there were several good oil-paintings on the olive-green walls, and portraits of the elder Mr. and Mrs. Patterson; the window drapery was fresh and tastefully arranged, and on the sill outside was a box all ablaze with geraniums in their fullest summer bloom. Evidently Mrs. Patterson was a better housewife than her sister; and either she or her husband had a taste for literature, for one deep recess was filled by a bookcase with well-laden shelves, and the volumes were evidently not kept for show; there were also on a side table several reviews, and the latest numbers of the best periodicals. Pretension was certainly not the foible of the Patterson family.

Lulled by distant subdued sounds, and grateful for the opportune repose, Joan almost fell asleep—indeed, she was just being transported back again to the sunny glades of Dunham Tower Park, when the entry of the servant and the tea-tray dispelled the pleasant illusion, and she started up, rubbing her eyes, and apologising to her host who appeared at the same moment—"I do think I was almost asleep."

"And I do believe you were!" he replied, pleasantly. "I am only sorry we disturbed you, for a little nap is sometimes even more refreshing than food, and you do look quite overdone. Now for a *really* good cup of tea. My wife prides herself on her tea, and though, unfortunately, she is not here to-day, I think I can promise you as good as if she were. Luckily, there was cold chicken and tongue in the house, and new-laid eggs from our own farm in Essex, so I do hope you'll make a hearty meal, for I'll lay anything you have forgotten all about your dinner or luncheon, or whatever you call your mid-day repast."

"Indeed, I felt too sick at heart to care for food, and I am afraid I can do but scant justice to your very tempting fare; but a cup of excellent tea is always a luxury. You are very kind, Mr. Patterson."

"Not a bit of it. I am so glad to see my Cousin Joan—that is your name, is it not? We had the same great-grandfather, you know. My father used to talk of his Cousin Louisa sometimes, and I remember hampers of poultry and pork, and such things, going to some rectory at Christmas, when I was quite a little chap. Somehow or other, the interchange of civilities died away, and when I first met your brother, as Ada Cook's lover, I had only a misty recollection of the name. However, we, on our part, shall be delighted to renew the acquaintance."

But, after all, Joan did make quite a satisfactory little tea, and Richard seemed wonderfully pleased when she took a slice of delicious tongue with her bread-and-butter, and did not refuse one of the new-laid eggs—only that morning from the Essex farm, whence, in after days, many a good thing found its way to "Cousin Joan."

But the afternoon was passing rapidly away, and Joan did not forget who was due at Chestnut House no later than six o'clock. So with cordial adieux she took her departure, promising to come again as soon as "the mistress" returned.

It was five o'clock when Joan once more saw the furze-bushes on the Heath. The mists were gone now, the roads and the grass were dry, only a few fleecy clouds floated in the clear, blue zenith, and the great city lay far away,

sleeping in the summer sunshine. Never had the Heath looked fairer! Would the shadows flee away as speedily from her path—the path that had showed so brightly only two days since?

Six o'clock saw Arthur punctually arrive, and Mrs. Bray, who presided at the tea-table, again decided that he was just the match for her sweet Miss Ruby! It was very kind of him, she thought, to take such care of dear Miss Joan! It was not every young man, in these days, who would interest himself so sincerely in the affairs of his *mother's friend*! For in no other light did it occur to Mrs. Bray to view the connection between Miss Carisbroke and the Warrendales.

But when Mrs. Bray and the tea-cups had disappeared together, Joan lost no time in telling the whole unhappy story that weighed so heavily on her heart. "And now you know all about it, as far as I can tell you," she said, when all was disclosed, "and, I think—I think, Arthur, you had better leave me to be Joan Carisbroke to the end of the chapter. It is possible—only too *probable*—that the name of Carisbroke will soon become too famous—too *infamous*, alas! to be coupled with that of Warrendale that has never known a blot."

"My dear Joan, what nonsense you are talking! No blot, forsooth! Why, my ancestors were border-chieftains, and that means, you know, border-thieves. They would 'lift' their neighbour's cattle with the utmost complacency, whenever they fancied them; they gave themselves up to deadly feuds, and burned and harried on the smallest provocation; and I have no doubt some of them were hanged for their misdeeds."

"Ah! but that was long ago, when Christianity meant the Mass, and civilisation was yet unborn."

"Never mind, the blots are there, on my escutcheon, just the same."

"No doubt. But they are forgotten; they belonged to an age when might was right, and when morality was generally ignored. The Warrendales of to-day come of unblemished descent, and—nay, do not smile, Arthur, I am feeling all this so seriously, so painfully; it may be,—it *will be*, I greatly fear—that my only brother will be

prosecuted *for forgery*. And then—I do not think I ought to let you link your name and fortunes with my own.”

“If you talk in this way, I shall think you do not love me ; that you are seeking some escape from your engagement.”

“You cannot think that ; I do not deserve that you should doubt me. But on one point I shall be firm—our engagement must be private—must remain unannounced till this miserable business is concluded. We are not boy and girl to rush before the world as plighted lovers. You owe it to your family, to yourself, not to speak of what is between us, till we see daylight beyond the dark.”

“We may be silent, but people will guess. I cannot pledge myself to act any part but my real one. I am your lover, not merely your *friend*.”

“They may *guess*, but that may easily be prevented, and facts and suppositions are different things. Besides, there is nobody who has any claim to be told the truth, except, perhaps, my sisters, and they must wait awhile. They must know all that I have just told you, and more will probably be unfolded as the miserable affair progresses. They will take little interest in anything else at present. I wish it could be kept from Ruby.”

“And why from Ruby more than from Brenda ?”

“Because Ruby is so exquisitely sensitive. She feels things ten times more deeply than Brenda does. And—I love my child so well, that I cannot bear to see a shadow on her brow ; I like to think of her as one—

“‘Rose-lined from the cold,
And meant verily to hold
Life’s pure pleasures manifold.’”

“Are you not making an idol of your pretty Ruby ?”

“I think not—I hope not. I cannot think that God is ever displeased with us for *loving* unselfishly, though it may be passionately. An idol is something that usurps God’s place, that makes us love Him less, and serve Him less freely. I am sure my child makes me love Him more, and strive to serve Him better. Her winning sweetness, her gentleness, her clinging love, are all precious gifts from Him, which demand my purest gratitude.”

"I am really impatient to behold your darling! And now I think of it, you have never shown me her likeness. You have one, I suppose?"

"I have two. The one taken only this summer is, in my opinion, a thorough failure—it does Ruby positive injustice; only I fancy she is one of those who never look their best in a photo. Here is one that we all thought a very good likeness three years ago, but she has altered a good deal since then."

"Doubtless. This is almost the picture of a pretty, charming child I knew ten years ago. But Miss Ruby must rank as a young lady at sixteen or seventeen; for that, I think you said, was now her age?"

"She will be seventeen on the last day of the year. See, this is the latest photo. Can you trace the resemblance to the child?"

"Most assuredly I can; but if this picture is not absolutely a caricature, Ruby has altogether 'grown-up' since the former one was taken. They have not caught her expression at all? Perhaps not; but I can perceive that she must be a truly beautiful young woman. The features are perfect, and the *pose* of the head is charming. She is like you, Joan, my dear."

"Yes, in a sense, I know she is. But even supposing I am as handsome as your partiality imagines, I am but a very plain likeness of my lovely little sister. She—the latest-born—the one who came to us in the dark and cloudy day, seems to have monopolised all the beauty of the family."

And then the conversation reverted to the unhappy affair which had hurried them from Argendale. Joan told Arthur more of Frank's history than she had ever confided to any one before, and expressed her conviction that he had abandoned his family, and would never—unless by compulsion—return to England.

"He never must return," replied Arthur. "My dear Joan, I will see this Mr. Patterson to-morrow, and then I will confer with my lawyer, Mr. Freeman. He is one of the first legal authorities in the country, and also one of the best and wisest of men. And what can be done shall be done, you may be sure of that, my Joan."

"Thank you, a thousand times!. I should have felt most desolate had I been called to meet this great trouble alone. I think you will like Richard Patterson. At any rate you will get from him a clearer and more exact account than it is possible I could give you, and I am sure he is a man whose word may be taken."

"It would not be of any use to interview your sister, Mistress Ada, I suppose?"

"I do not believe it would. She has no very definite ideas of the merits, or, rather, the demerits of the case, and the circumstances are not precisely as she states them. But what is to become of her if Frank should never return? He talks, certainly, of sending for her and the children when he is 'settled,' if that ever come to pass."

"We must make it come to pass! The affair of the bill—of the—the *signature*—must be arranged at any cost. And this must be done on condition that Mr. Carisbroke at once secures a home for his family over-seas. If they remain here, they will be a burden on your shoulders and on those of your sisters as long as you all live. Be encouraged, dear; I feel sure that all can be managed successfully."

"How long are you remaining in town?"

"Till your business—which is *my* business—is well and satisfactorily completed. I wrote to my mother to-day, telling her not to expect me—for the present. Oh, by the way, I may as well speak to Mr. Freeman at once about the settlements. Lawyers are such slow coaches—even the best of them."

"No! Take no steps at present, I beseech you. It would be painful to connect a *criminal* affair with the business of your marriage. It would not be well, after having arranged for Frank's 'defence,' or for his security, to instruct Mr. Freeman to make arrangements for the benefit of Frank's sister."

"It would not be pleasant, I grant. I only wish the fellow had gone out of the country and changed his name long ago. Perhaps it will be as well not to mix up the two affairs; and if you are quite resolute not to proclaim the engagement, it does not matter—for a *little* while—though remember, Joan, my dear, I shall not brook an indefinite delay. I consent, for the present, to be silent,

and to take no steps for wedding arrangements; but we must be married, come what will, very early next year, at the latest. I will give all my energies, just now, to the settlement of this most unfortunate affair. You will let me have my own way regarding it, will you not?"

"I trust your discretion and your judgment absolutely; and if money should be immediately required, I am sure you will advance it, on the understanding that it shall be repaid to the very last farthing."

"Do not trouble yourself in the least about money. Whatever is wanted shall be forthcoming. We will talk about repayment afterwards. Certainly Mr. Patterson ought not to be a loser. He has, as you say, a family of his own; besides, a man in trade cannot afford to sink his capital in a quicksand. Just leave it all to me, and it will go hard if I do not manage to have my own way, and let nobody be the worse! If I do not turn up to-morrow evening, conclude that I am unavoidably detained; there are several matters requiring my attention, which may as well be looked into as I am in town. When do you expect your sisters from Guernsey?"

"Not till the middle of next month. It is so long a journey that it is a pity they should return a day earlier than is absolutely necessary. Mademoiselle and I can very well receive the pupils. We are thinking of adopting the new division of the scholastic year, substituting three terms for the four quarters, which are almost fallen into disuse; then our summer vacation will begin and end quite a month later than now."

"You will never have another 'summer vacation,' Miss Carisbroke! so you need not trouble yourself about terms and quarters! Our holiday-time next year will be just when we can best arrange to take it, and it will last as long as seemeth pleasant and convenient to ourselves."

"I really cannot realise anything so delightful and so free!"

"You will realise it when it comes. And now I must say good-bye, if I am to get back to Harley Street in anything like decent time. If I do not get up here to-morrow I shall write, of course, and report progress. You will come with me to the gate?"

And to the gate Joan went, arm-in-arm with her betrothed; and notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, they had a charming little saunter on the Heath, and enjoyed themselves, after the fashion of lovers, who have walked in the summer starlight from time immemorial. Joan went back under her own chestnuts in better spirits, and with a lightened heart.

Yet that night, ere she lay down to sleep, her prayer ascended—"O Lord, in Thee have I trusted, *let me never be confounded!*"

CHAPTER XLIV.

RUBY.

She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely apparition sent
To be a moment's ornament.

AFTER a fortnight's hard work Arthur Warrendale began to hope that his efforts in the cause of the miserable defaulter would be crowned with success. Money and pains freely expended will do much in this work-a-day world, and in this case they bade fair to achieve all that is generally attributed to them. Proceedings had been commenced, but no decisive step was taken, when the master of Dunham Tower threw himself into the breach; and as those who had suffered wrong were speedily assured of recompense, and as poor, foolish Frank had no greater enemy than himself, matters were soon put into such a train as to relieve the apprehensions of those whom his guilty conduct had filled with sorest dismay.

"For you see," said Richard Patterson, "though I felt that it was really my duty to prosecute the rascal, I had not the heart to do so. In the first place, we are related—cousins, several times removed; then my wife and his wife are own sisters; and last, but not least, I feel so deep a

respect for Miss Joan Carisbroke that I should be sincerely grieved to take part in anything that would cause her sorrow. She is a person for whom I have the profoundest esteem."

"What has the fellow done with all the money, I wonder?"

"He has carried off the best part of it with him, I should say; for I have now ascertained that every creditor is left unpaid. I have done as you wished, Mr. Warrendale. I have taken Mr. Carisbroke's affairs into my own hands. It will be a most unthankful task, I am afraid; but I do not mind that, if only I can succeed in putting matters as straight as they ever can be. Ada is a most difficult person to deal with."

"I thought she was rather a foolish, weak-minded sort of woman."

"So she is—as poor and weak a thing as you can possibly imagine. But it is the wishy-washy little women who are the hardest to manage. I have heard some men say that they prefer pretty doll-wives, who have no ideas beyond the cookery-book and the laundress's list; but I don't agree with them. I don't care to sit opposite an animated lay-figure when my day's work is done. I like a sensible woman, who can discuss matters reasonably, and can play her part and keep her temper if we drift into an argument. No creature in the world is so obstinate as a really foolish woman; she'll give in, perhaps, as you fondly believe, but your words make no impression upon her, and when you leave off you are just where you began. She will do a thing because she will, and she won't change her mind because she won't. There is no convincing a fool!"

"From what I hear, poor Mistress Ada was brought up in a bad school."

"That she was. She had a foolish mother, and she taught all her daughters to worship what she called 'gentility.' They learned nothing thoroughly—they did nothing thoroughly. They were not ladies, and they were not ordinary useful young women. The elder ones, I believe, were more efficient in the house, but the younger girls, especially Annie, my wife, and Ada, were about as incapable in every point of view as you can well imagine.

Finery and pretension, and the worship of their *fetish*, gentility, made up most of their education."

"I wonder you were not afraid to take a wife from such a source, Mr. Patterson."

"Well, you see, I fell in love, and I made up my mind to have Anna Matilda—I call her plain 'Annie'—at any price! My sister warned me that I was not doing a very wise thing for myself; but there! I would not listen to advice—whoever does in such cases! Besides, I had my own notions of what I would do, when I once got my wife to myself. I saw she was a really sensible girl, and was not half so fond of shams as were the others, and I determined to give her a new start as soon as ever we were married. I told her beforehand—I thought it was only fair—that she would have little to do with her own people, and that *her* house, which would be my house, must be ruled after quite another fashion from that to which she had been accustomed. I promised to make her a good husband, if she would try to be a good wife. I told her she should never repent her bargain. We had both a spice of hot temper in us, and we agreed to bear and forbear. So we married, and though we had our little tiffs for the first year or two, we got on very well, and Nancy Patterson turned out to be quite another person from Anna Matilda Cook. And now, Mr. Warrendale, I think my wife is about the best and the bonniest in Christendom! She has got rid of the nonsense her silly mother crammed her with; she makes me as happy as any king; she dotes upon the children, but she does not spoil them; and, in my humble opinion, there is not another woman fit to hold a candle to her, be that other who she may!"

"I congratulate you, Mr. Patterson. You ought to be a thoroughly happy man."

"I ought to be, if I am not; but I am! And I wish you as good luck, sir, when you choose the lady of Dunham Tower. Of course, your choice will be very different from mine; you will want a lady born and bred, beautiful and accomplished, and all that; but whatever the man's station in life may be—whether he weds with a peeress or with a servant-maid—what he chiefly wants is goodness, and sweetness, and truth; for that is what

makes up the love that will stand the wear and tear of every-day life—the life that comes to most, if not to all of us, I fancy, in this world of push and pull, and disappointment and vexation! Yes, Mr. Warrendale, I can wish you nothing better than to be as well married as I am.”

“You shall certainly have cards, and a fine wedge of cake, when the happy event comes off,” said Arthur, laughing.

He had a strong inclination to tell Richard *who* had promised to become Mrs. Warrendale at no distant period; but he remembered Joan’s charge of secrecy till this vexatious business of Frank’s should be settled, and was silent. All, however, was going well, and he hoped that two or three more weeks, at the utmost, would see everything as comfortably arranged as such an affair could be, and the preparations for the wedding actually commenced.

“I am going up to Chestnut House presently,” said Arthur, as he rose to leave. “There is no message, I suppose!”

“Well, I fancy you had better say that Mrs. Carisbroke is ill in bed. I went to talk to her last night, and found her upstairs, and really, as it seemed, very poorly. I was sorry—selfishly so, I am afraid—for I wanted some information which she only could give me, and I could scarcely bother her while she was suffering from an excruciating headache and a racking cough. She is one of those luckless people who are always taking serious colds, and chiefly because they don’t ‘take care.’ And oh, dear, there was that puny little baby wailing feebly at her side, and the other small creature with the long name—Ethelinda, or Ethelina, or something equally sentimental—was stuffing herself with sticky-stuff, and demanding to be heard incessantly. I don’t wonder poor Ada’s head was ‘splitting.’ She is quite sure she is going to be very ill, and she peremptorily desired that Joan Carisbroke should be sent to her with all possible speed. Ada evidently imagines that Cousin Joan is at the beck-and-call of all the feckless folk who get themselves into trouble.”

"Unless I am asked, I shall say nothing about Mrs. Carisbroke. I am out of all patience with the way in which she treats her sister-in-law. She seems to have no idea but that it is Joan's primary duty to succour and comfort her without the smallest reference to her own convenience. There are some people in the world who seem born into it, only to exercise the patience and test the unselfishness of others; and this Mistress Ada appears to be one of them. I shall say nothing about her unless compelled; I dare say there is nothing serious the matter?"

"I dare say not; that sort of woman is always crying '*Wolf!*' We were quite surprised when Mrs. Cook *really* died. She had been making *post-mortem* arrangements so long; and Ada is wonderfully like her mother. No; I think you are not bound to tell Miss Carisbroke the fresh demand made upon her kindness, though I felt bound to tell you."

And then Arthur drove away in the cab that had waited for him at the door, and went to visit Mr. Freeman, who kept him so long over an important document, that it was later than usual when at last he found himself on the way to Chestnut House. Two days more, and Brenda and Ruby would be at home again, for they were returning a week earlier than had been planned, and Arthur meant to make much of this evening, and the next, the last in which he would have his Joan entirely to himself. He was rather vexed, therefore, at finding that he was just one hour behind the time at which tea would be ready, but took comfort as he reflected that a few more months would find him taking all his meals with the lady of his love, as a matter of course.

He had grown very familiar with the ways of Chestnut House of late, and walked in and out like one of the family. The August sun was slanting its golden rays across the chestnut avenue as he walked along it, and seeing one of the French windows open, and some one sitting at it, partially hidden from view by the foliage of a large Virginian creeper, he, taking for granted that it was Joan in her favourite evening seat, crossed the lawn towards her, and found some one who, at the first glance, seemed a stranger.

A girl of such radiant beauty as he had never even conceived sat on a low chair reading, and so deeply absorbed in her volume as not to look up till Arthur's form shadowed the light. Then she lifted up her lovely, innocent eyes, and he saw that it was *Ruby*! Fitting name for one so fair, so unlike any woman he had ever seen before. In spite of the second photograph, which at a glance he decided to be not a likeness, but a *caricature*, he had expected to find something of the child of old times. A faint blush stole over her sweet, pure face, as he spoke to her, and apologised for his intrusion.

"I must entreat your pardon," he said; "I saw a light dress fluttering between the leaves, and thought it must be Miss Carisbroke, who expected me."

"Joan is out; she was obliged to go to Laburnum Place this morning. I am Ruby, as I dare say you guess."

"I was sure of it, although I supposed you to be still several hundreds of miles away."

"Something happened to send us home rather unexpectedly. For one thing, there was a contagious case of fever in the village, and Mrs. Clarke thought, as our furrough was so nearly out, it would be wiser to anticipate our journey by a day or two. And, once on our way back, we were seized with an unmistakeable attack of *mal de pays*, and—here we are! Joan only had our telegram late last night. She was so vexed to have to go away almost as soon as we were in the house."

"I heard from Mr. Patterson that Mrs. Carisbroke was ill, and wishing to see—your sister Joan. When will she return?"

"Indeed I do not know. At first I felt so cross I could have cried; all the way up from Bournemouth I counted the miles, so glad to think that each one lessened the distance between Mammie and me. 'Mammie' is Joan, you know! Do you recollect that I told you long ago that she was my mother as well as my sister! Why, it must be ten years, Mr. Warrendale—since—since you saved my life! I have never forgotten it."

"It was not a tremendous feat, I assure you; but I am very thankful that I happened to be there on that most eventful day. What a little fairy you were!"

"Was I? I was a dreadful little worry, I am afraid, getting into the water, and having to be dragged out at the expense of an impromptu bath for you. But, Mr. Warrendale, I never forgot what you did for me then—I have very often wished to see you again. Joan said she expected you this evening, and we were all to make much of you."

"Who are the 'all,' may I ask?"

"Mrs. Clarke, Laura, Brenda, and myself. Mrs. Clarke—we generally call her Maud, though—is going to remain with us for a week or two, because her house at Eland, which has had to undergo sundry repairs, is still in a state of confusion. Laura is her daughter, you know, and next to Agnes Macdonald, my most particular friend. Maud and Brenda are busy upstairs. Laura is gone to coax Mrs. Bray out of some apricot jam for my especial delectation. We have waited tea for you."

"That was very kind of you. It is not my own fault that I am behind time—I was kept at Lincoln's Inn an hour longer than I bargained for. Do you know, the more I look at you the more you remind me of the little girl I was so fond of ten years ago! What have you been doing all the time?"

"Growing-up, I suppose! looking about me to see what the world was like, and loving Mammie! And you, Mr. Warrendale?"

"I was nearly grown-up when first we met, though I suspect I was only a great, awkward boy. I know I enjoyed nothing so much as a romp with you on the rocky Argendale moors, when we used to play at hide-and-seek and puss-in-the-corner to our heart's content. Well! I have turned into a man since then, and I have lived a great deal in Germany, and been very busy, and am now settled down with my mother, in the old home, where you and Joan first knew us."

"And Meliora—dear Meliora!—she was with us then. It was a bitter grief to Mammie, her being taken away from earth. I often thought how I should like to visit Argendale again; but Mammie somehow seemed to shrink from all mention of it. I was both surprised and delighted when Mrs. Warrendale persuaded her to go to

Dunham Tower; and I was so, *so* sorry to have missed Mrs. Warrendale when she was here, about two months ago—I wanted so much to see her again.”

“I think, since Joan absolutely refuses to return with me to Dunham Tower, I must borrow you to cheer my mother, who is as partial as ever to the society of young people. Do you think your sister could spare you?”

“I am afraid not. There is a great deal to do here, and Mammie has quite enough on her own hands; we shall be at regular work again in little more than a week, and then I shall have my duties. Besides, I do not think she *could* spare me again so soon; she is very, *very* fond of me—the dear old Mammie!”

“I do not wonder at that; but I think we must persuade ‘Mammie’ to let her darling spend a few weeks at Argendale before its summer glories fade. Do you know, I think it more beautiful than ever!”

“I dare say I should enjoy it now more than when I was a child, though I had, I do believe, more than a child’s appreciation of its rare, wild loveliness. But, please, say nothing about my visiting Mrs. Warrendale at present. Mammie is so purely unselfish that I am convinced she would sacrifice her own wishes in a moment if she thought it would do me good or give me real pleasure. And I have had a very nice holiday. I have enjoyed Guernsey most thoroughly; it has cost lots of money, too—it is such a long journey; but Joan never grudges me anything, and I really believe she would cut off her right hand if it were for my benefit. No, I must not leave her again just yet. And here is Laura.”

Then followed the usual introductions. Miss Clarke was a pretty, refined-looking girl, but she was absolutely plain, Arthur thought, by the side of the lovely Ruby. Oh, those perfect, delicately-moulded features; that rich, creamy, olive-touched complexion; those pure, soft rose-tints on the dimpled, rounded, almost childish cheeks; that sweet, expressive mouth, with exquisitely-formed coral lips and little pearly teeth; those large, soft, dark eyes that made him think of the unruffled, limpid tarns among his native mountains; eyes so glorious that he could scarcely take from them his fascinated gaze. He

had dreamt of a creature like this, but he had never seen, never expected to see, aught so wondrously beautiful. Why had not Joan told him that Ruby was peerless in her exceeding loveliness? and yet he might have guessed that so fair a child would grow into a woman of unsurpassed attractions.

But he roused himself from the reverie into which he had fallen, and began to talk to Laura Clarke, quickly deciding that she was a very pleasant, well-bred, well-informed young lady; and pretty—yes, certainly very pretty!—with her clear, healthy complexion, violet-blue eyes, and amiable yet piquant expression. But Laura Clarke was no prettier, no more graceful than many of the girls one meets from time to time in the “rosebud garden of girls,” while Ruby was the very Queen-Rose of Beauty herself!

Soon afterwards the tea-bell rang, and Brenda and Mrs. Clarke came in. Mrs. Clarke, albeit Laura’s mother, was still a fair, almost youthful-looking woman; she had one of those calm, thoughtful, most peaceful faces which, to gaze on, seem to rest and refresh the tired spirit. As Arthur spoke to her, he thought involuntarily of the words, “Great peace have all they that love Thy law.”

Brenda looked gentle and good; she could scarcely be called pretty, but her manner was pleasing, her eyes kind, and her voice peculiarly sweet and low. She had not much to say for herself, and seemed rather to shrink from notice. Arthur thought she was not exactly the kind of woman to take the headship of an establishment like Chestnut House.

What a happy evening that was, in spite of Joan’s absence! Brenda and Ruby knew nothing of Frank’s transgression, beyond the fact that he was once more plunged in debt, and thought it prudent to put the ocean between himself and his creditors. That was bad enough, in all conscience; Ruby’s cheeks burned when Laura inadvertently mentioned his name, and Brenda, in her quiet way, wondered how any one could possibly pursue such a disreputable career, and live; but neither of them dreamed that it was only through Arthur Warrendale’s unremitting exertions that they were spared the unutterable shame and

misery of seeing their brother brought publicly before a court of justice. Had they guessed even remotely at the true state of the case, there would not have been so much laughter and innocent mirth at the tea-table, nor such pleasant reminiscences of Guernsey afterwards.

They walked till quite late in the sheltered grounds, watching the large yellow moon rise out of the distant city's purple haze, and listening to the merry shouts and songs of parties returning from their day's "outing" among the woods and fields. Then, as it grew dark, and Maud Clarke summoned the young people to the house, they gathered in the drawing-room round the pianoforte, and Ruby and Laura sang duets to Mrs. Clarke's accompaniment. The minutes flew so quickly, that they all started when the great hall-clock struck eleven, and Ruby exclaimed, in dismay, "We have forgotten all about Mammie; oh! Maud, where can she be?"

"I am afraid she is still at Laburnum Place," replied Mrs. Clarke. "She did say that if Mrs. Carisbroke were really ill, she might think it wise to stay all night, and she added that we were not to expect her after half-past ten. Joan seems to live for everybody but herself."

"That she does, indeed!" assented Ruby, "but perhaps she may come yet; that clock is too fast, I know. We have had no time to tell her anything about our adventures; it is too bad, her being spirited off like this."

"Let us get our shawls and go down to the gate with Mr. Warrendale," said Laura, seeing Arthur with his hat in his hand; "we can look along the road for ever so far; it is almost as light as day. Then if we see nothing of Joan, we must conclude that she will not be at home to-night. May we go, mamma?"

"If you will put on your hats and shawls, and not stay too long chattering at the gate. It is tolerably warm, I think; still late wanderings—I might say midnight loiterings—are always imprudent. Laura would linger out of doors till it began to dawn, if she had her own way."

"Oh, mamma, I will be good. Besides, there is Ruby, who is never naughty, and Brenda, who is prudence itself."

And the happy quartette marched off into the garden, while Mrs. Clarke took her book, determined, however, if

"the girls" were not back in a quarter of an hour, to go in pursuit of them. She was just starting, when in they walked, and Brenda apologised for their delay, saying that Mr. Warrendale had insisted on their walking down the road with him, the air was so sweet and lovely, and the moonlight so clear, and then of course he must escort them back to their own gate, where there were more good-byes and last words, and so the time slipped by till a distant clock chimed, Brenda was almost sure, the third quarter of the hour, though Mr. Warrendale insisted that it was only half-past eleven!

"Mr. Warrendale is very inconsiderate, I think. I hope no one saw you on the road at so late an hour."

"We did not meet a creature, except Mrs. Dormer's Persian cat, taking a moonlight ramble," said Ruby. "Really, Maud, I am very sorry—it was my fault; but we had Brenda with us, and it was so very pleasant, and I was so glad to see Mr. Warrendale again. Please forgive us."

"My dear child, there is nothing to forgive. I am only sorry that you and Laura should lose your beauty-sleep, especially after the fatigues of your journey. Nor do I think Joan would be quite pleased at your being outside the grounds at so late an hour, even under Mr. Warrendale's protection. But, as you say, Brenda was with you, and she is mistress here."

"A very tired mistress!" said Brenda, with a yawn. "I am afraid I was imprudent, but the children did seem to be enjoying themselves so completely, and Mr. Warrendale was in such spirits, and it is not school-time yet. I assure you I am a very dragon of propriety during the half-year; Joan says I am a regular Lady-Abbess. And there is Mrs. Bray, looking as if she thought we ought to be safe in bed and asleep; and the house is all locked up, she tells me, so let us go upstairs directly."

Brenda and Ruby were together in Joan's absence, and Ruby seemed still in uncontrollable spirits.

"What is the matter with you, child?" said Brenda, at last, a little crossly. "If you go on making such a chatter I shall soon be as wide-awake as yourself. What ails you, Ruby? Your eyes are as bright, and your cheeks as rosy, as if you were just beginning the evening."

"I really don't know, but I do feel wonderfully light-hearted to-night—well! 'this morning,' if you choose! It is nearly one o'clock, I know. I suppose it is that I am so glad—so very glad to be at home again. And I am pleased to be quite out of Alexander Macdonald's reach—the stupid thing, wanting *me* to marry him!"

"Was it so very stupid, Ruby?"

"As stupid as it could well be. I don't want to marry anybody! I mean to stop at home with Mammie, for I don't know how many years yet."

"We shall see! Now, I liked Mr. Macdonald very much."

"You liked 'Uncle Duncan' better, Brenda! But, now, it is you who are chattering! Dear me, I wonder how poor Mammie is getting on; it was shamefully tiresome of Ada sending for her to-day. I hope she will go after Frank as soon as possible, for she is continually troubling us in one way or another. If all brothers are like ours, I am most thankful that we have only one to bother us. Good-night! I don't mean to speak another word; I believe the cocks are crowing at Mrs. Dormer's!"

CHAPTER XLV.

AT THE GARDEN GATE.

For my heart was hot and restless,
And my life was full of care,
And the burden laid upon me
Seemed greater than I could bear.

ADA's illness proved to be no transient malady. The cold she had taken through her own imprudence fastened upon her with alarming tenacity, and the doctor whom Joan immediately summoned at once gave it as his opinion that one lung was seriously affected. This was upon a first and cursory examination; but when a few days later he made

more searching inquiries, he looked extremely grave, and at last admitted to Miss Carisbroke that there was serious cause for alarm, and that a second opinion was desirable.

Joan lost no time in requesting her old friend Dr. Parker to consult with Ada's medical attendant. He came, and entirely agreed with Mr. Greenway — Mrs. Carisbroke was in a very precarious condition; her symptoms were most unfavourable; indeed, if Miss Joan wished the actual truth, he could give no reasonable hope of her recovery.

Joan had, to some extent, apprehended this. Nevertheless, Dr. Parker's dictum came upon her with something like a shock. She had thought Ada very unwell from the time her baby was born, and she had urged Frank, at their very last interview, to procure for her the best advice, and, if possible, to let her and the children go to the seaside or into the country for change of air. Always apathetic and listless, when neither vanity nor self-love was touched, she had become since the spring singularly lifeless, and, as it seemed to Joan, nerveless and languid to an unusual degree. When her baby was little more than two months old she had insisted on going to a ball given by one of Frank's particular friends; she had taken a severe cold, which she was evidently unable to throw off; and, again, early in June, when the weather was chilly and unsettled, she had joined a picnic party of reckless young people, who foolishly set off in the rain, spent a miserable day, chiefly within four walls, and returned at night to their respective homes weary, disappointed, and, for the most part, out of temper.

Ada's flimsy finery was completely spoiled, and, what was worse still, she was wet and cold on the return journey in the open brake. The natural result was an increased cold and a very troublesome cough that soon began to keep her awake at nights. She took divers nostrums, and tried a variety of lozenges, and seemed for the time relieved. Then came the trouble of Frank's departure, and though it made astonishingly little impression on her weak and frivolous nature, she fretted after her childish, wayward fashion, and bewailed continually her unhappy lot. As the truth grew upon her, she found herself left

solely responsible in the dreary, neglected house, her purse most slenderly supplied, and her noisy, unmanageable children clamouring for all sorts of indulgences, and demanding to know why their father did not come back. Her spirits altogether failed her, and she became seriously unwell.

But as she had been of late years one of those silly women who do really appear to "enjoy bad health," and who constantly discuss their ailments and glory in want of strength, no one thought very much of her complaints. Only Joan felt any anxiety on her behalf, but till the day that she came at Ada's almost imperative summons, she had no notion that pulmonary mischief was actually at work.

"Where is her husband?" asked Dr. Parker. "He ought to come home immediately; the end is not very far off."

"Are you *sure*?" was all that Joan could falter. She had had her fears, certainly; but the idea of a speedy termination to her unhappy sister-in-law's sufferings had not once occurred to her.

"Nothing can prolong her life beyond a few weeks; she has absolutely no constitution. She must always have been a poor frail thing, and the troubles and cares of maternity have been too much for her. Caught cold, do you say? Yes; cold upon cold!—at picnics and dances, from what I can learn! And, for the last two years, she ought never to have breathed night-air, or worn low dresses, or gone lightly clad in an open carriage. Half the women who die of consumption, or of internal disease, are their own murderesses. It is a thousand pities that the advance of education does not teach girls common sense."

"I am trying to do what I can," replied Joan, sadly; "but I cannot tell you how foolish the majority of parents are in this respect! caring so very much more for accomplishments and for display than for the solid instruction and mental training which make girls something more than fashionable *belles*, and mere women of society. I am trying to teach my pupils some of the laws of health, and to impress upon them the fact that they are responsible to God for the preservation of their bodies in good work-

ing order ; but it is very up-hill work. If I taught them a new kind of embroidery, or gave them a peculiarly brilliant touch in music, my attempts would be infinitely better appreciated."

"I can well believe that ! We have all heard of the dame who charged 'twopence extra for manners.' If I kept school, I think I would charge a separate fee for teaching *common sense* ; people never value what they get for nothing. Has Mrs. Carisbroke any sisters ?"

"She has several ; and the two elder ones are unmarried. I should think they might come and take care of her a little, for, after this week, I cannot be spared from Chestnut House. And Brenda is not strong enough for nursing. Then there are the children !"

"The baby will not trouble any one long ; it is dying even more rapidly than its mother. And the other child—the one with a sticky mouth and a pasty complexion—seems to me in a very unhealthy state. The boys may battle through, if they have plain, wholesome food, and plenty of pure air."

"As it is, they sleep in unventilated rooms, are fed chiefly on sweet cakes and puddings, and have their daily allowance of beer or porter to give them '*a constitution*.'"

"Beer and porter ! Might as well give them a little mild poison at their age, and with their unsound physique ! But about Mrs. Carisbroke's sisters ?"

"I will see them at once. The Misses Cook are, I believe, kind-hearted, well-intentioned women ; only there has been a sort of family quarrel ever since Mrs. Cook's death several years ago. But I do not doubt that they will take charge of both mother and children when they know the truth. They are a jangling, sparring family, I believe—these Cooks, about whom I really know very little, but, on the whole, affectionate."

And Joan's confidence in the family affection was abundantly justified, for both Rosamond and Lucilla, when they heard of their sister's hopeless state, came speedily to the rescue. These two elder girls—or women, rather, for the spinster-sisters had early lost all trace of youth—had a small, a very small, income of their own, inherited from a great aunt, who kindly divided between her two

eldest nieces all she possessed at the time of her decease. Rosamond and Lucilla, who were really attached to each other, and a good deal snubbed by their younger and prettier, and, perhaps, cleverer sisters, took lodgings for themselves, and lived quietly together, when the death of the mother broke up the household. They supplemented their income in several ways, Rosamond taking in fine needlework—at which she was an adept—and Lucilla thankfully accepting a situation of morning governess to some young children who required but the merest rudimentary instruction.

They managed very comfortably, seeing little, however, of Mrs. Carisbroke, because of a “deadly feud” which arose out of certain supposed reversionary interests in the late Mrs. Cook’s wardrobe. Through Ada’s malign influence, Mrs. Patterson was also for a time estranged; but her husband soon reasoned her out of the folly of quarrelling about a few old gowns and imitation-laces, when he was ready to bestow upon her any rational amount of clothing of the best quality. Nevertheless, when Joan told her mournful story, both Rosamond and Lucilla declared their willingness to do all they could for their unfortunate sister. Rosamond prided herself on her genius for nursing, and Lucilla was fond of children, and, of course, poor dear Ada ought to be looked after by her own kith and kin. It ended in the Misses Cook removing themselves and their effects bodily to Laburnum Place, Mr. Patterson having undertaken that the rent should be paid on condition of the landlord taking no proceedings while the dying woman lingered; and by these two despised and “old-maid” sisters, Ada was ministered to for the short remainder of her life.

Something had been said about Ruby’s going to Dunham Tower to stay with Mrs. Warrendale, and Joan was quite willing to spare her, thinking how her darling would so much enjoy the lovely scenery, and profit by the elder lady’s society. But just as Arthur was about to write to his mother, he received a letter from her, stating her intention to be in town on the following Tuesday; and one day when Joan came home from Laburnum Place, she found that it had been settled that Ruby should,

with her permission, spend a week or two in Harley Street.

"I may, may I not, Mammie dear?" said the girl, almost pleadingly. "I know it is very naughty of me, but I do feel so unwilling to go back to school-work—*just yet!* If I might have just a little longer holiday—one little fortnight more."

And Joan, thinking how natural it was that so young and bright a creature should revolt from the drudgery of the schoolroom and long for a little society outside of her own family circle at once consented. But she felt something like a pang when she saw Ruby's radiant countenance, and marked the avidity with which she began to make preparations for her visit.

Frank's affairs were pretty well arranged now, thanks to Arthur Warrendale's assiduities—that is to say, all was actually, in point of fact, settled; only, as is usual in such cases, there remained certain legal formalities to be observed. Nothing had yet been said of Joan's engagement; somehow she had seen so little of Arthur, and had been so seldom in his company, that nothing had *by accident* transpired. No one seemed to have the remotest guess at the relations between them; no one seemed even to think of the possibility of Joan changing her maiden state for that of matron!

And now school duties were being resumed, the pupils were returning, and it was not expedient that Arthur should be too much at Chestnut House. Joan told him, half hesitatingly, that he must not come quite so often now that "the girls" were back, and he quietly assented—so quietly that she felt a little, just a little, surprised. He said no word about their present position, which was becoming rather irksome to her. Things seemed so satisfactorily arranged that there would be no reason why Brenda and Ruby and the Clarkes should not be enlightened. But as Arthur did not revert to the subject, Joan felt that she could not be the first to break the silence which she had herself imposed. She waited for one word from him, and it did not come. Could it possibly be that he repented of the words spoken at Argendale!

He was extremely kind—kinder than ever, Joan thought,

but he and she were scarcely ever alone, even for a moment; consequently, he had no opportunity of availing himself of any of his lover's privileges. He was very grave, at times almost stern, and one day, to her great annoyance, he vexed Ruby by speaking, as she declared, "unkindly." Had the revelations of Frank's misdeeds so disgusted him, that he was beginning to shrink from any closer connection with the family? Was he regretting that he had ever proposed? or that he had not accepted the freedom she had almost forced upon him, when first she knew the full enormity of her brother's guilt?

Joan began to feel nervous and worried, and even painfully shy. Once she thought she would tell Mrs. Clarke all about it, but she could not force herself to make a beginning; Maud was so provokingly unconscious, so utterly unsuspecting of her having any sort of love-story to confide. So she resolved to be silent still. Mrs. Warrendale would soon be in Harley Street, and once with her, to whom she could speak freely, all would be right. "For," mused Joan, "if, indeed, Arthur feels that he has made a mistake, that this unhappy affair alters his feelings towards me—that, after all, the marriage for which he pleaded would not be for his happiness, it is better—far better, that all should be at an end between us. But, oh! why did he not leave me alone! Why did he rouse this affection, which has become the ruling principle of my life! And, oh! what will my life be if I have to go back to the dreary round of duties from which I was promised complete escape. I love my work no longer. Ah me! I have lost the calm, peaceful content of other days."

At last the situation became almost too painful to be borne; and yet no one seemed in the least aware of the real state of affairs. Neither Maud, nor Brenda, nor Ruby, nor Laura, seemed any more than Mrs. Bray to suppose it possible that Arthur Warrendale was more to her than to any other person in the house; he was the son of Miss Carisbroke's greatest friend, and he had most kindly aided her in her extremity—that was all!

One evening, after he had been and gone again—his mother was expected in Harley Street next day—Joan and Mrs. Clarke were sitting alone together in the library.

The pupils were all in bed ; Mrs. Bray was busy in the housekeeper's room tying down preserves ; Brenda was still upstairs looking over those interminable exercises ; the two girls, Ruby and Laura, and Mademoiselle were walking in the garden, for it was a warm, starlight night, and the air was fragrant with the scent of jasmine, mignonette, and a late-flowering lime, that every year blossomed after all its kind. The gas was all ablaze in the library, and it was uncomfortably warm, though the French window was wide open. Joan looked out upon the lawn, wishing Maud would lay down the piece of fine lacework which occupied all her attention ; she felt almost irritable, seeing her friend's quiet absorption in her interminable task, and wondering that she could give her mind to such trifles ! It was so unlike Maud, whose employments were generally of the most useful nature. At last she said,—and she was keenly sensible of the sharpness of her tone,—“ Really, Maud, I wonder at your trying your eyes doing that delicate tracery by gaslight ; I am sure it is bad for you ! ”

“ And so am I,” replied Maud, cheerfully, at the same moment rolling up her work, and putting it into the basket. “ Shall we have five minutes' ramble under the trees before the house is shut up ? ” And, suiting the action to the word, Mrs. Clarke joined her friend, who was now standing on the top step of the flight of four which led down to the broad gravel-walk. On the other side of the lawn were two figures, and Joan was peering through the darkness, which seemed all the denser from the brilliant light behind. “ There are two of the girls,” she said, still a little nervously, “ but I cannot be quite certain who they are.”

“ They are Laura and Mademoiselle,” replied Mrs. Clarke. “ Mademoiselle is so much taller than Ruby, and I know Laura by the flutter of her Shetland shawl.”

“ Then where is Ruby ? ”

“ Seeing Mr. Warrendale safely off most likely.”

“ Maud, what do you mean ? ” and the words rang out with a sharpness that told the keen pain of the speaker. Mrs. Clarke for an instant made no rejoinder, and Joan again queried, “ What is it, Maud ? Why don't you speak ? ”

"My dear Joan, I was afraid it would vex you, and I scolded Laura for something she let slip last night; but I thought—we all thought—that you must have noticed it."

"Noticed *what*? How mysterious you are! And why should I be vexed?"

"I do not think you should be *vexed*! I should not, I confess, if it were my own Laura, though I dare say it would cost me a pang to find that her first and best were given to another. Mothers don't at first like the notion of their girls going from them. Yet it must come, and you never could expect to keep a creature like Ruby far beyond her early womanhood."

"Maud, I cannot understand you. Who wants to take Ruby from me? You surely cannot mean that Arthur—that Mr. Warrendale—that he cares for the child as——"

"That is just where it is, my dear Joan; you persist in calling Ruby 'a child'—and girls of her age most frequently are children, I allow—but Ruby, it seems to me, has suddenly sprung into full-statured womanhood. I fancy Mr. Macdonald's offer had a great deal to do with it. There was not the slightest response on her side, but the mere circumstance of being courted told her that she was no longer a child. She liked Alick very much, but she could not receive him as a lover—as a future husband! He was not the man for her. I was going to say he was too old—only, now I come to think of it, Mr. Warrendale cannot possibly be younger."

"What has Mr. Warrendale to do with it? You are talking in enigmas, Maud."

"Is it possible you have not noticed the feeling that there evidently is between Arthur and Ruby? They fell in love, I believe, that first evening, when he came to tea, and you were in Laburnum Place. It was a mutual attraction; we all saw it, and Laura said what she thought, that same night, in our own room; but I reproved her, and told her that she must, on no account, make any remark on the subject, not even to myself, for the present. My dear Joan, what is the matter?"

For Joan had retreated into the library, and was sinking back, pale and trembling, in the chair that stood nearest the window. "I am so greatly astonished," she faltered—

"I cannot understand it! Surely it cannot—oh! it cannot be! You must be mistaken."

"I do not think I am. But, dearest, I, on my part, cannot understand why the idea of an attachment between these two should give you uneasiness! It seems to me that Mr. Warrendale is not only what the world calls a most eligible *parti*, but a young man to whom no Christian mother need hesitate to trust her daughter. I may say to you that had Laura been the object of his choice I should have thanked God. But, of course, Laura had not a chance, especially as he saw Ruby first. Beauty such as Ruby's is seen only once or twice in an ordinary lifetime."

"I am dazed, Maud, fairly dazed! and all the more so that I can now recall tones and glances that might have enlightened me earlier. But, still—still, it cannot be, I think! Maud, I will tell you in confidence that Arthur Warrendale *is engaged*."

"Is that really true? Why was he not spoken of openly as an engaged man? I really think men as well as women ought to wear betrothal rings; there ought to be some outward and visible sign of people's relative condition. I should have thought Arthur Warrendale free as Ruby herself when first he came among us. But of course you know! No wonder you are terribly shaken! your sweet, innocent darling, that she should give her loving little heart to one who has nothing to give her in return."

"Maud, you will drive me distracted! Ruby—my little Ruby in love! and with Arthur Warrendale! Oh, God, grant it is all a wild mistake—a terrible delusion!"

"God grant it may be, if it be not for Ruby's happiness. But it is no kindness, Joan, to soothe you with fair, smooth words, that are not the very truth itself; nothing is gained by ignoring, or trying to ignore, actual facts."

"Tell me straight out—do you believe Ruby cares for him?"

"I *do* believe she cares! Now, do not look so angry, Joan! anybody can see that *Arthur* cares. He has from time to time shown his heart pretty plainly, and Ruby, in her innocence and purity, has unconsciously responded.

Oh, Joan, were you *never* in love—just a little? Don't you know how it is, how it all comes about? Two strangers meet, and they are strangers never-more. They read each other, as a mystical, yet open book; their lightest words speak volumes; their eyes flash sympathy. Even now, after all these years, I remember how it was when first Laura's father and I knew each other; I can go back and retrace it all, even to the most trivial acts and speeches. The past is a wonderful exponent of the present. Do you know for certain that Arthur Warrendale is engaged?"

"For certain."

"His mother told you, of course?"

"No; he told me himself; I knew it before his mother."

"How you look, Joan! Oh, you do not mean that it was *you* to whom Mr. Warrendale's word was pledged?"

"I do mean it, Maud. It is the dreadful—dreadful truth! Arthur and I were solemnly engaged—are engaged still, since no word of separation has passed between us. We only waited for Frank's affairs to be settled as quietly as possible to announce our coming marriage, which I had consented should take place immediately after Christmas. Till I knew whether or not the name of Carisbroke was to be publicly dishonoured, I stipulated for dead silence on the subject. All is right now—as far, that is, as wrong can be righted; and Arthur makes no sign. Now I understand; he sees the mistake he has made. Thank God, it is not too late! Three people's lives need not be spoiled! Neither Arthur nor Ruby shall be sacrificed!"

"But yourself—yourself, my dear Joan?"

"The less said about myself the better. And, Maud, I must entreat you to keep secret as death the confidence I have reposed in you. Let no one know now, or henceforth, that Arthur Warrendale and I were ever more than friends. I will not stand in his light! Ruby shall never be pained through me."

"Make no rash vows, Joan. I may have misconstrued Mr. Warrendale's regard for Ruby. His engagement to you makes all the difference; Brenda and Ruby are his sisters, you know. Why, my husband loved Meliora

dearly—more than any of his own relatives! Do nothing rashly, I beg.”

“I am not much given to rashness,” said Joan, with a pale, sickly smile. “I must see my way very clear before me ere I take the smallest action, or speak one word of import. I must be quite—*quite* certain that *both* care before I relinquish my own rights; before I yield my place to another, whether that other be Ruby or some one else. Maud, I hear the girls coming back to the house; promise me that not one syllable of to-night’s conversation shall pass your lips.”

“I promise. Nor will I ever reopen the subject with yourself, unless at your own desire.”

And just then Laura and the French governess, followed slowly by Ruby, entered the room.

“Why did you not come out, Mammie?” said Ruby, as Mrs. Clarke turned down the gas that no one might notice poor Joan’s deathly face. “How hot and stifling it is in here,” she continued; “and it is quite lovely out of doors, a real summer night!”

“Where have you been, Ruby? We saw Mademoiselle and Laura pacing the garden walks arm-in-arm, but you were not with them.”

Even in the uncertain light both Joan and Maud, and perhaps Laura, saw the crimson flush stealing over the girl’s lovely face as she answered, “I went to the gate, Mammie, with Arthur—with Mr. Warrendale, and then—I don’t quite know how it was—we began to talk of all sorts of things, and we walked up and down the avenue till we forgot about time. You are not displeased, Mammie dear?”

“Not at all, my dear. Only I think Mr. Warrendale should not keep you out so long at this hour.”

“But you look so grave, darling.”

“Do I? I am very tired, and not at all well. Mrs. Clarke and I are waiting to go to bed. No, I want nothing, only to lie down and be quiet.”

And for the first time since Ruby was a tiny, unconscious child, Joan wished that she had her chamber to herself.

An hour afterwards, when Ruby lay sleeping profoundly, Joan stood by her bed. She watched the sweet, almost child-like face, as one glowing cheek pressed the pillow, and the

long, dark silken lashes hung over it like a veil. She scarcely dared to breathe, lest she should disturb the peaceful slumbers of her darling—her darling for evermore, though, perchance, her innocent, unconscious rival! Whether it was the magnetism of Joan's earnest gaze that made Ruby open her drowsy eyes it is difficult to say; but something roused "the child," as the elder sister still fondly called her, and she murmured, "Mammie dear!—Mammie? why don't you go to bed?"

"I am going, dearest," and she bent down and kissed the rosy lips. "I am afraid I awoke you; good-night. God bless you, my darling."

And then Joan extinguished the light, and lay down in her own bed—but not to sleep. What was she to do?—what was the next step to be taken? She felt not only miserable, but bewildered, and she was so much afraid of making some fatal mistake which might bring sorrow to all concerned.

One thing was certain, she must be quite sure of her premises before she spoke or stirred at all in the matter. She must know that Arthur loved Ruby—really and truly loved her—ere she could give back her own plighted troth. Joan was no heroine of romance to sacrifice herself for a mere sentiment. "If I am certified that Arthur is faithful, I will be faithful to him," she told herself; "faithful as if we were already man and wife. Ruby is such a child, that she cannot care *really* for him—not as I care! not as she *should* care for the man to whom she is to be united for life! When she knows that he is not for her—that he is *mine*, she will think of him only as a brother. But if the affection be on his side also, if he wants Ruby, I will release him, and Ruby shall never know (if I can help it) that she has not his first love and troth."

And then she prayed, "Oh, my Father God, guide me through this labyrinth into which I have wandered. Show me the right thing to do; tell me the right thing to say. Let me know the very truth concerning these two who are dearer than life to me. Lead me and guide me, and strengthen me for the pains and trials of the paths before me."

The sunshine was bright upon the spiky chestnut-burrs, and a blackbird was singing in the noisette roses under her window, before she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XLVI.

ARTHUR'S SECOND CONFESSION.

"Look, what is done cannot now be amended."

MRS. WARRENDALE reached Harley Street at the time appointed. Arthur met her at Euston Terminus, and at the first glance the mother's eye saw that something was amiss. He had kept her pretty well posted up in the progress of business affairs, so that she knew quite well that matters were on the point of being satisfactorily settled; she could only suppose that he was tired and worried with the ungenial task he had undertaken for pure love's sake.

"You are not looking quite well, my dear," she said, when they were fairly settled side by side in the carriage; "you must get out of town again as fast as you can. How dismal the streets look with so many houses closed, as if for so many deaths; I never did like London in August."

"Then why did you come, mother?"

"Principally because I must submit myself to the dentist's hands without delay; partly because I thought I should like to see Joan. She dines with us, of course, to-night?"

"Well,—no, she does not. Somehow, it was never thought of. You see, she is very much occupied just now, commencing the school campaign."

"I felt so sure she would be in Harley Street this evening that I said nothing about it in my letter yesterday. Really, Arthur, you are looking quite poorly!"

"I am not quite the thing, but by no means poorly; only a little out of sorts. It has been very hot, and I have been a good deal harassed one way or another."

"I understand. It must have been a most unpleasant piece of business. You do not regret that you undertook it, Arthur?"

"Not at all. The worst would have happened, I am

afraid, if I had not come to the rescue; I am most thankful that I have been able to manage matters so successfully. You know that poor Mrs. Frank Carisbroke is dying, but she will probably outlive her baby."

"I am not sorry to hear that; the poor little thing will be safer in the world beyond the grave—motherless, and worse than fatherless, its path here might have been a very rough one."

Then some further talk ensued about poor Ada and her children, and Arthur so managed the conversation that it did not revert to Joan during the remainder of the drive. It was not till dinner was quite over, and the mother and son were sitting over their coffee-cups, that her name was again mentioned. Then Mrs. Warrendale began—"I suppose Joan is quite well, as you say nothing to the contrary."

"Yes, thank you, she is pretty well, though none the better, of course, for the trouble she has had ever since she returned from Argendale. She does not look very bright or happy, I must say."

"I dare say not; such a shock must have told upon her. I can only hope that we shall never hear more of Frank Carisbroke. Is anything settled about the school? What do you think of Brenda? Can she *pose* as Madame la Directrice of Chestnut House?"

"I do not know; I should not say she could. She is an extremely excellent, painstaking person, and seems never tired of correcting exercises or of personally superintending the pupils; but she is evidently incapable of arrangement, and could scarcely work upon a method of her own. She depends entirely on her sister—on both her sisters—for the younger one, though quite inexperienced, has plenty of originality in her composition, and could take the helm, but for her extreme youth, far better than Miss Brenda, only she has a thorough distaste for governing in any shape, and helps in the school from a pure sense of duty and right."

"She will not object, then, to give up the schoolroom at Christmas, and become Joan's home-child till she marries. So much the better! Is she really so very lovely as Joan paints her?"

"Yes; much more so! Mother, I have something to

tell you, and I do not know how to begin. I am afraid you will think very badly of me. At first I thought I would keep my own secret, but I have never yet hidden my heart from you ; besides, I sorely need your counsel."

"You alarm me, Arthur ! Your looks would imply that something of a most serious nature has transpired."

"Something has occurred, most serious—most painful. Mother, do not utterly despise me ; but you were right, and I was wrong. I did *not* love Joan Carisbroke when I asked her to be my wife."

"*Arthur Warrendale !*"

"You are displeased, mother, and with reason ; for I made you an agent, as it were, through the whole affair. You invited Joan to be your guest at my desire ; you loved her as much for my sake as for her own ; you received her as your daughter and now——"

"Now, *what ?*"

"Now I know it was not *the real thing*, and you—you feared it all along—you were afraid."

"I was ! I was ! There was something wanting in your conduct towards her, and about her. You took the matter so coolly. Yes ! you manifested a certain enthusiasm, a certain ardour that, to a great extent, reassured me ; but there was an almost unnatural prudence in your whole behaviour. As I told you, I remember still my own young days, and *my* lover's words and looks and tones ; and there was so much *wanting*, it seemed to me, in your case."

"I know ! I was cold and calculating, I weighed every speech and action in most unlover-like fashion ; I told myself that I was meritoriously sensible and prudent ; that I was not a boy to fall in love ; I was a man, and preferred to walk into it without any *glamourie*, and with my eyes wide open."

"You had your eyes wide open, one would think. And you knew exactly what Joan was ; she was with you continually, day after day, in all the familiar intimacy of the home circle. I thought you studied her character very closely."

"And so I did ! There it was ; the study that I made of her was incompatible with true love ! It might have

been a partner for business that I was selecting, instead of a partner for life. I see it all now. Mother, I shall always love Joan Carisbroke with a steadfast, brotherly, friendly love. I shall never esteem any woman more than she. I shall to my dying day regard her with feelings of the deepest reverence—of profoundest respect and admiration. She might be anything in the world to me—save my love ! ”

“ And does she know this ? ”

“ No ; I think not—I believe not ! And yet—she has been strangely grave and reticent of late—the reflection, probably, of my own gravity and reticence, for I am conscious that I have betrayed a certain uneasiness of mind. It was her own resolve, you know, that nothing should be said of the engagement till Frank’s terrible escapade was safely tided over.”

“ I know ; and taking everything into consideration, I am sure she was right, though I almost wish now it had been otherwise. But the necessity for concealment has now passed away—the name of Carisbroke will not appear before the world, you tell me ; the miserable story will never be publicly discussed—how is it that the sisters do not know ? ”

“ Joan and I have not spoken on the subject. For one thing, we have seen little of each other—she has been much with her unfortunate sister-in-law at Westbourne Park ; she has been unavoidably occupied in receiving her pupils and their friends, and in inaugurating the half-year’s *curriculum*. The sisters evidently guess nothing, and, then, Mrs. Clarke and her daughter are still visitors ; it has so *happened*, I think, that we seldom—and during the last few days, *never*—found ourselves alone together ! It is true I sought no private interview—neither did she.”

“ And, Arthur, how did you discover the real state of your affections ? How did you know that you had made this terrible—this deplorable mistake ? ”

“ I found that I felt for another what I had *never* felt for Joan !—that even were that other inferior in character and disposition to Joan, I must prefer *her*—love *her* with all my heart and soul to my life’s end ! ”

“ And that other ? ”

"Mother, I scarcely dare tell you."

"Is it Mrs. Clarke?"

"No, *no*! I almost wish it were. Maude Clarke is a charming woman, but she is over forty years of age! No, nor is it her daughter. Laura is an extremely nice girl, and pretty, I suppose, and I dare say she will some day make some good man very happy; but she would never have revealed to me how insufficient was my love for Joan. It is worse than you think, mother—it is Ruby!"

Words failed Mrs. Warrendale. It was hard that she should lose the daughter whom already she loved so dearly; it hurt her to think of the pain which Joan must suffer; but oh! how far more cruel must be the pain, coming as it did from such a source! Ruby, of all women in the world, to supplant the sister who had been to her all the mother she had known! And was Ruby to blame?

No; Ruby was not to blame. Arthur soon made that apparent. Ruby never guessed that Arthur had been—*was* Joan's affianced lover! Ruby was probably unconscious of her own feelings; but that she did "care"—as women say—he had himself no doubt. He told his mother all he had to tell, finishing up with, "Now, what am I to do?"

"Your own heart and your own sense of right must dictate that," replied Mrs. Warrendale, gravely. "I cannot advise you—I *will* not take upon myself the responsibility of guiding, or attempting to guide, one who knows his own mind so little. As you once reminded me, you are old enough to judge for yourself; you must do as you think best, Arthur."

"Now, mother, you are angry! Well, I am angry with myself, but all the self-reproach in the world will not mend matters."

"You have not spoken to Ruby?"

"I have not, and yet, I think—I am almost sure—she understands."

"And possibly Joan, my poor Joan, understands."

"It may be so, her manner is altered of late. But, mother, can you not see in how cruel a position I am placed?"

"I can see in how cruel a position you have placed both

Joan and Ruby! One of them must suffer—perhaps both. You won Joan openly, you won her whole, true, woman's heart, and you knew it; if covertly you have won poor little Ruby's affections, I can only say I am most deeply grieved; and, I must say also, I am ashamed for my son!"

"I do not wonder, and yet I cannot exactly blame myself for loving this sweet, gracious young creature, who flashed upon me like a sudden inspiration, that could not and would not be repelled. An adverse fate threw her in my way; I did not seek her."

"All that may be strictly true, but a man should know his own mind when he asks a woman for her hand. He should be quite sure that he is in earnest, before he utters words which can never quite honourably be recalled. Do you know what you have done, Arthur? You have spoilt Joan's life for her. You have taken from her what you cannot restore at any price—her peaceful, calm *content*. She was quietly happy in her work; she wanted no change. She will not be a miserable woman, because she is too good and too wise to let one black cloud overshadow all her days; but she will suffer cruelly, for you have struck her in her most vulnerable part, and through the child that is more to her than her own life. She may recover her cheerfulness, her peace of mind—I think she will—but she will have a hard warfare to accomplish before she can look up again and say, 'It is well.'"

And so they talked on till past midnight, with very little satisfaction to themselves or to each other. Never had mother been prouder and *surer* of her son, and now he had fallen from his high estate, and had assumed that most contemptible of characters—a male jilt! There was very little sleep that night for either, and the morning found both wearied, dispirited, and worn. But Arthur, had taken, as he thought, his resolution. He came up to his mother's room, while she was taking her breakfast, and at once commenced, "Well, I have decided."

"You have decided what?"

"I have resolved upon the course of action I must pursue. I remember when I was a little boy, and I was uncertain which path I should take in a question of some

small difficulty, you said, 'Take the one that is least pleasing to yourself, and it will not lead you far astray.' I followed your advice then, and afterwards, as I grew older; I am following it again to-day,—I will marry Joan Carisbroke."

"You will marry her, and love her sister! Arthur, you must do nothing of the kind."

"I will conquer the love; I will think but of Joan; only there comes the tangle—how can I help seeing Ruby continually? Still, what must be, must be; I am bound to Joan by every tie of truth and honour; I will sacrifice myself for my word's sake; I have been very foolish, very wrong, but I hope that the mischief is not irreparable. I will at once put the settlements in hand; I will tell Ruby and Brenda that I am to be their brother, and Joan shall never know my faithlessness. Mother, are you satisfied?"

"No. A thousand times, no! You shall not do it. Joan is far too good to be given to an unloving husband, who takes her only because he will not break his word. It is a wretched business, Arthur, but you will not mend it by forswearing yourself at the altar, by pledging yourself to act for the remainder of your days a living lie. You will be true only in seeming. Besides, do you think Joan will take you without a full explanation of your coolness; and having explained, even partially, do you suppose she will consent to be your wife? I must confess that under similar circumstances I would not take a man for my husband of whose undoubted affection I could not be sure. It seems to me that the last wrong you can do to a trusting, noble-hearted woman is to marry her when you know that she has not your full and entire affection."

"Then you think I must let Joan go?"

"I think you must tell her the truth. No good can come of insincerity in any shape. You will lose Joan, probably Ruby! Arthur, I am very sorry for you, yet I cannot counsel anything but absolute frankness. When one has carelessly or wilfully tangled a skein, till unravelment is impossible, it remains only to cut the knots. I will not reproach you; I will try not to blame you, even. This unhappy affair is your misfortune, as well as your

fault—though ten times more Joan's misfortune. A man of thirty ought to be past making such mistakes; but if made, it seems to me that his only alternative is to accept the humiliation of penitence and confession towards the woman whom he has so cruelly wronged. Go to Joan and tell her the truth, if—if you are quite sure that at last you really know your mind!"

"Mother, that sounds harshly; but I am afraid I deserve it. Only see Ruby, though, and you will not think me so very incomprehensible. No, it is not her mere beauty that has taken my heart by storm; it is something more than that—something that I never before felt for any woman, something that I dreamed not of till I saw her, something that will never pass from me while I live—betide what may."

"How I wish you had found Ruby earlier! But of all vain things none is more foolish than to wish the past otherwise than it has been. Ruby, however, is too young for you, Arthur. She is almost a child."

"She is not a child in mind, though she has all the unconscious grace and the simplicity of one. And as for youth, mother, that is a fault that every year will mend. Every year will make the disparity less evident, and, after all, I am not so very much older than she."

"Only thirteen years! It is better that husband and wife should be more nearly of an age. Still, as you say, advancing years make the disparity, when it is on the right side, of small account. We need not, however, disquiet ourselves at present on that point, for I do not think that you have any chance with Ruby. Unless she be utterly unlike what she has been portrayed, she will indignantly dismiss the suitor who comes to her over the ruin of her sister's heart. Yes, Arthur, you have certainly lost Joan—the noblest-minded young woman, I think, I have ever met; and, in common decency, to put it on no higher ground, Ruby cannot accept your suit."

"You are going to Chestnut House to-day?"

"I have not decided. What can I say to Joan?"

After all, Mrs. Warrendale did go to Chestnut House that very afternoon. "I will see for myself how the land lies," she thought; "I will form my own opinion. Unless

Joan asks me any leading question, I will say nothing about the future."

It so happened that Joan was not at home when Mrs. Warrendale reached Hampstead; but the maid who opened the door to her remembered her very well, and asked her to remain till her mistress returned. "For I expect her every moment, ma'am," she said; "she was called away on very important business, and Miss Brenda is with her. I am sure Miss Carisbroke would be so very sorry to miss you. Ah! there are Miss Ruby and Miss Clarke coming in from their walk with the young ladies!"

Ruby at once came forward, and understanding who the visitor was, led her to the drawing-room, and rang for tea; and before Mrs. Warrendale had been five minutes in the young girl's company, she was fain to confess that Arthur had a fair excuse for his inconstancy. Yes; Ruby was beautiful beyond compare, and not only beautiful, but gentle and sweet, and gifted with innumerable attractions of voice, movement, and manner. Oh! if only Arthur had seen her before Joan's sojourn—her fatal sojourn she could call it now—at Dunham Tower! Laura Clarke, after a few words of courtesy, had gone away, so that Mrs. Warrendale was alone with Ruby.

"I remember you quite well," Ruby was saying, when the elder lady had regained the composure she had almost lost, so great was her regret on Joan's account; "you seem very little altered since you took me for a drive on the last day of our stay at Argendale—the day after Mr. Warrendale saved my life. Ah! I have never forgotten that."

"We have none of us forgotten it." Joan and I were talking about it only the other day—the last time we saw the Unfathomable Lake. And that reminds me, I have not asked how Joan is."

"I am afraid she is not at all well. You know what trouble brought her home, and how that poor Ada is dying. There was a message from one of the Misses Cook this morning, begging her to come to them, for it was feared that their sister would not survive the day; the little baby died yesterday morning. So Joan and Brenda went as soon as they could; they were to be home to five o'clock tea; they will be back directly, I expect."

"And Joan is poorly, you think?"

"Not exactly poorly, for she persists that she is only tired, that she ails nothing, and will soon be all right again. But, indeed, Mrs. Warrendale, I am quite anxious about her; she is not the same Joan I left when I went to Guernsey. She is so much thinner and quieter, and she has lost all her colour. I hoped that the beautiful air of Argendale would do her so much good, for she wanted rest and change after a whole half-year's anxieties and labours. Everything depends upon her, you know; Brenda and I give what help we can, but we are not clever and experienced as she is. Was she quite well at Dunham Tower?"

"Quite well, and in the best of spirits. It was most unfortunate that she should have been so hastily recalled. Was she at all ailing when you returned home?"

"She was looking very poorly, as I perceived the moment I saw her. Since then she has not improved. There is something about her I don't know—I don't understand. But I feel pretty sure she is what people call 'out of health,' and I want her to consult Dr. Parker. I am so glad you have arrived, Mrs. Warrendale, for if *you* seriously propose that she should take good medical advice, I think she will."

"You make me really anxious on her account, for Joan is very dear to me. Never have I felt as I feel towards her, except to my own daughter. Do you remember Minnie?"

"Oh, yes, quite well. Miss Warrendale was always very kind to me. But she is not Miss Warrendale now, I recollect."

"No, she is Mrs. Kingdon. She married nearly seven years ago, and she has two dear little children. But to return to Joan. I shall watch her very closely, and if I find in her any symptoms of real malady or failure of strength, I shall urge her to see her doctor at once. Prevention, you know, is a great deal better than cure, and, in the end, far less costly. You love Joan very dearly, Ruby?"

"I should be a wretch if I did not love her dearly—more dearly than words can tell! She has 'mothered'

me, as Brenda says, ever since I was a baby. I owe everything to Mammie, even my life, I believe, for they say I was such a poor, puling infant that nobody thought I could be reared. Mammie had me with her day and night. She washed and dressed me, and made all my clothes when papa became too poor to keep up a proper nursery. She taught me everything I know. She was always contriving pleasures for me, and studying my welfare. I never remember a harsh or a hasty word from her. I have had from her, all my life, the sweetest, tenderest, most unfailing affection. No one but myself knows what Joan really is—how good, how true, how noble, how wonderfully unselfish she is!" And the tears stood in Ruby's sweet eyes, and trembled on those long dark lashes that fringed the pure-tinted roses of her cheek when she finished speaking.

Mrs. Warrendale herself was touched. "You must always be very good to Joan," she said, kindly; "you are very dear to her, Ruby—you must never, *never* say or do anything to cause her pain!"

"May I have pain myself when I pain her!" cried the girl, earnestly. "I could almost say—May God forget me when I forget the unspeakable love and devotion of my sister-mother! I can never repay her half her affection—half her patience! But there she is, Mrs. Warrendale, coming up the drive; she looks very tired, and so does Brenda."

Mrs. Warrendale looked out, and there was Joan, with lagging footsteps and weary, dejected mien, coming towards the house. At one glance she saw that Ruby's account was correct—Joan was evidently "out of health." She came straight into the drawing-room, for she had been told who was there, and for a moment the excitement of meeting brought the colour into her thin cheeks. But it quickly faded, and when the glow was gone Mrs. Warrendale was simply shocked to perceive how great a change had passed over her favourite since they parted at the railway station a few weeks before.

"Why! Joan, my dear, what have you been doing to yourself?" asked Mrs. Warrendale, in positive dismay. "You look several years older than when I saw you last.

Your bloom is gone, you have lost flesh, and all the light has faded out of your dear eyes! What have you been doing to yourself! What is it, Joan, my darling child?"

And at the motherly tones and searching, yet compassionate, glances, Joan utterly broke down. She laid her stately head on the kindly shoulder, and broke into an agony of sobbing.

"Oh! my darling Mammie!" cried Ruby, rushing to pour out a glass of wine, "you are tired to death! worn out at last. No wine? then I will make you some fresh tea; you shall have it hot and strong. And how have you left poor Ada?"

"Ada is with God," was all Joan could say. "She died in my arms about two o'clock." And then followed another flood of passionate weeping.

CHAPTER XLVII.

"I SET YOU FREE, FREE AS AIR."

"Could he help it, if my hand
He had claimed with hasty claim?
That was wrong, perhaps—but then
Such things be—and will again.
Woman cannot judge for man."

JOAN was so obviously broken down that Mrs. Warrendale hoped no reference to Arthur would be made that evening, and when calmness was restored she tried to turn the conversation into other channels. Naturally, it drifted into the sad story of poor Ada and her children, deserted by the husband and father who had brought so much shame and misery on all who were unfortunate enough to bear his name. Rosamond and Lucilla Cook had been extremely kind to their hapless sister, and they were still in charge of the motherless little ones at

Laburnum Place. As to Frank himself, there was very little to be said; the question at present was the future destiny of the children, especially the boys, who were tolerably hearty, and likely to grow up, and require a home for yet some years to come.

"We must try to get them into some institution," said Mrs. Warrendale. "I should think they might rank as orphans, bereft of both parents, as they really are. I wonder if they would be eligible for Haverstock Hill?"

"I am afraid not, but inquiry might be made. Miss Cook and Lucilla told me the other day that they wished to keep Ethelinda till she is old enough for the school-room; but the poor child is evidently extremely delicate. I scarcely think she will live to require an education. I am thankful that the sickly little baby has been taken with the mother. Poor Ada, she clung to me at the last, more than to her own sisters; she lamented her useless, wasted life, and wished she had ever thought of doing her duty. 'For I have thought principally of myself,' she wailed only this morning; 'all I cared for was to get all the pleasure I could! If I had my time over again I would be so different; but now it is too late—too late!' and those were almost the last words she spoke, for very soon afterwards she became unconscious. Just before she died, she seemed to recognise me, and held out her arms like a child, as if she wanted me to take her. I raised her a little, so that her poor head rested on my shoulders, and held some wine and water to her lips, but she was past taking it; she tried to say something—I think it was about Frank; there was a struggle for breath, a slight convulsion, and then all was over. And as I laid her down on the pillow, I thought that there was scarcely a trace left of the pretty, heedless girl that Frank brought here ten summers ago, with so much pride, as his betrothed. Oh! how well it is that we cannot see the way before us: it is good that the future is hidden from our gaze."

"Yes; or to-day's burdens would become too heavy to be borne, and we should look at all present mercies in the shadow of coming sorrows. Frank had his chances, I suppose?"

"I can hardly say yes. He had certain advantages, of course, superior, in outward show, to any that fell to our lot as girls; but as he had never any idea of self-government, and naturally, as it seemed, great laxity of principles, he needed a strong hand to guide him in early youth. He was our mother's darling, and she let him go his own way, paid his debts, and furnished him with money as long as she could, very often without his father's knowledge. He got the notion that the world was made for him, and that he was the centre of the orbit in which he revolved. He had not the smallest idea of self-denial or of self-restraint, and all too late my poor father discovered the mistakes of his training. His character was wanting in bone and sinew; every childish weakness had been indulged, every vainglorious quality encouraged; and so—and so—he was launched upon life's great ocean."

"Nevertheless, he *might* have steered his bark safe into port. Many a man starts more heavily laden, and with less knowledge of the shoals and quicksands of society than he must have done. And he must have felt that all depended upon himself."

"Ah! if he had only learned from his own errors, and from the failures of others! if it had only been 'borne in upon his mind'—in Quaker parlance—that it is a veritable truth, that—

"Men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."

But my poor brother appears never to have profited by the lessons of experience, and then—God forbid that I should speak harshly of the dead!—his marriage was the crowning point. He wedded with the very last woman who should have been his wife."

"How did it come about, this unsuitable match?"

"I hardly know, for we saw little of Frank in those days. There was a scheming mother, and a very pretty girl *with a voice*, who, unluckily, had been brought up to make market of her charms. She was educated to marry, as well and as soon as she could; no seed of honest, honourable independence was ever sown in her young

mind; she was taught that her beauty was to win for her a husband as handsome, and, of course, as wealthy, as she could secure. I am afraid there was some deception,—and I am quite sure there was bitter disappointment! It was evidently supposed that Frank was a much 'greater catch' than he really was, and I am afraid the coming to light of certain unpleasant realities led to a great deal of domestic unhappiness, and eventually, to a great deal of treachery and fraud."

"And this is the end of it?"

"This is the end of it, so far as the parents are concerned. Who shall say what is in store for those forsaken children!"

"Who, indeed! my dear Joan. I do not wonder that you are almost broken down under the weight of the trouble and anxiety that came to you with that unlucky letter at Dunham Tower. Our being there together so happily seems now like a dream."

"It does, indeed," replied Joan, with emphasis. "I can hardly believe that I was ever there—that—well! altogether it is far more like a dream than a reality."

"I wish you could return with me in a fortnight's time."

"Thank you, but that cannot be, for every reason. Mrs. Warrendale, I have a question to ask you, and I want you to answer me—*candidly*."

"I would not for the world answer you otherwise than candidly, my dear, whatever your question may be; but I think you have had excitement enough for one day. Let us speak of other matters to-morrow."

"That tells me that you guess on what subject I wish to speak. I would rather, if you please, know what I have to know. There is nothing more trying, both to body and to mind, than uncertainty. Arthur has discovered that it was all a mistake—that evening on the Earnseat shore. Is it not so?"

"My dear, I am ashamed of Arthur. I am grieved beyond expression."

"That is quite enough. My worst suspicions are correct, I perceive; and, strangely enough, something at the time seemed to whisper to me that it would never do—that it could never be! I told him what I felt, almost oppres-

sively—that I was too old and grave for him. He wanted a far younger and more brilliant bride than I. I am so much older than my years. I felt then, and I have felt it increasingly since, that he is really very much my junior. I never was very young ; I never felt like a girl. I sprang from childhood into womanhood. The cares of life have pressed heavily upon me almost as long as I can remember, and there has been for many years a weight of responsibility upon me that has crushed out of me a great deal of the natural joyousness of ordinary women's lives. I told Arthur this, but he would not listen. *Now* he feels that I spoke truly ; *now* he feels that he has acted with undue precipitancy."

"My dear, Arthur has thought of you for years—ever since you first met, indeed. It was no hasty impulse that led him to propose to you that night. I did think—I quite believed—that his expressed affection for you was the outgrowth of all those years of silence, and I need not tell you, Joan, that *I* was ready to take you to my heart and love you as fondly as ever mother loved !"

"I know that, dear, dear friend ! And in time to come, when I have outlived all the pain and regret that is inevitable at present, I trust we may be in some degree restored to each other."

"You speak, my child, as if it were finally settled—as if Arthur and you were already parted."

"And so it *is* settled, though not one word has passed between us. It dawned upon me, I scarcely know how or when—yes, I do, though ; it was immediately after Ruby's return from Guernsey that Arthur *knew* that he had made a mistake ! Thank God it is not irretrievable ! I shudder when I think how terrible would have been the awaking, had it come when it was impossible to retrace our steps. I have longed to speak, to know certainly whether my fears were based on just grounds ; but somehow there seemed no opportunity, and I had not the strength or the spirit to make one. I knew you were coming, and I waited."

"Joan, I had no idea of this till last night. I was surprised not to find you at Euston ; I supposed you would dine in Harley Street, as a matter of course. It came upon me like a thunder-clap ! I could not believe what I

heard ; it seemed to me that I was suffering a horrible night-mare, and that presently I should start up full of joy and thankfulness that it was *a dream*. And even now I cannot bring myself to accept as a veritable reality my son's most censurable conduct. Do nothing hastily, Joan ; it may be that he is self-deceived ; that this sudden fancy of his is but a caprice that will, on maturer reflection, melt away ; that he will want ere long to return to his first love, and in her affection be fully satisfied."

"No ; that will never be. I read him too plainly thus to comfort myself. Arthur is not so much to blame. The worst I can say of him is that he ought to have known his own mind ; he ought to have been *quite* certain that he really wanted what he asked for. He has been very good and kind to me—he will always regard me as a dear sister ; I was very foolish to flatter myself that I could ever fill his heart with that other love—the only love that consecrates marriage, but that is all, and that is not enough for either of us."

"I was afraid you would say so—indeed, I could scarcely expect you would say anything else. I knew you would at once dissolve the engagement if you were at all uncertain as to being the sole object of Arthur's profoundest affection. Only, Joan dear, may not the uncertainty pass away ?"

"It has passed away, for it is no longer uncertainty. I had little doubt when I spoke to you ; now, I have none. When can I see Arthur ?"

"Will you see him to-morrow ?"

"That will be best. I shall be in a fever until all is completely understood. But oh ! how I wish it were anybody else than Ruby, who has so unwittingly, so innocently wrought the change ! If it had been Laura Clarke, I could have borne it so much better, for I fear I shall lose, not only my lover, but my child, whose love was all I wished for till I went to Dunham Tower. Do you know, Mrs. Warrendale, I think that silent, unconfessed courtship—so to speak—is extremely dangerous. I knew for days before Arthur declared himself, that he was thinking of me as a lover thinks. If he had never spoken, I could not have accused him of fickleness, but the mischief would

have been done. When I first began to reflect upon my position, I found that he had won my heart without actually, in so many words, asking for it. Now he has, without in the least degree compromising himself, made my poor Ruby understand that he loves *her*, and seeks her love! I doubt if the child knows what has happened to her, but the impression, I fear, can never be effaced."

"You believe, then, that Ruby returns the liking?—I will not say *the love*, for it is all too sudden for that."

"I am afraid she does. And when I say I am afraid, do not misunderstand me. For oh! Mrs. Warrendale, how can I give my child to one who loves to-day and unloves to-morrow? What if he engage all Ruby's young, passionate affection, and then discover that he is again mistaken! Tell me, is he what is derisively called a 'lady-killer'?"

"I cannot truthfully say that his name has never been coupled with that of any lady friend; but as far as I know, he had never before asked any woman to be his wife when he asked you that evening on the Earnseat Cliffs. I had every reason to believe that Arthur's heart was free when he came to England, and when, after the lapse of years he again met you, and resolved to win you for his own, I need not say I encouraged him in his resolution. I felt at once that you were a woman after my own heart, and that you would comfort Arthur when I was laid in the grave. I thought I saw the finger of God in it all; it was 'ordered,' I told myself, for my son had never actually spoken of marriage till the time came when you were within his reach. Joan, my dear, I think we are perhaps taking this affair too seriously; it is but a freak—a young man's freak of fancy!"

"I might say so myself if he were nineteen or twenty!—but Arthur is no boy. If ever a man is to attain to years of discretion and stability, it must be before he is thirty—and Arthur is almost that. But fancy, or no fancy, I cannot, and will not, be played fast-and-loose with, nor can I venture to expose Ruby to a similar inconstancy. Thank you, my dear, kind friend, for having entered into this most painful conversation—it must be almost as bitter to you as to myself. Now, I will tease you no longer. I

know that I am not mistaken, that my imagination has not misled me, and that is sufficient for this time. I only ask you now to tell Arthur that I wish to see him, and that I shall be alone, and disengaged, to-morrow evening."

Mrs. Warrendale scarcely saw her son that night, for she was in her own room, attended by her maid, when he came home at a much later hour than usual. "Have you anything to say to me, mother?" he asked, perceiving that the servant was not likely to be dismissed; and the reply was, simply, and very gravely, "No, Arthur. I have nothing to say to you to-night. I am wearied."

But in the morning, after a nearly silent breakfast, Mrs. Warrendale inquired of her son, "What are you going to do?"

"I have some business on hand to which I must attend," he replied. "I thought of dining at my club, knowing that you have engagements."

"Joan wishes to see you this evening."

"What passed between you yesterday?" he asked, eagerly. "I know you went to Chestnut House in the afternoon."

"What passed between Joan Carisbroke and myself is to be known only to ourselves. I can only say that her eyes have not been shut; she more than suspected your faithlessness, and she had little, if any, doubt of the cause of it. I can only hope that poor little Ruby has escaped; that you are nothing, and will be nothing, to *her*!"

"Mother, you speak with great severity."

"I cannot help it; I am feeling your misconduct most painfully. No; it is *not* too harsh a term; you have acted weakly, and dishonourably."

"Not dishonourably, I trust! I am ready to fulfil all obligations."

"You cannot fulfil them. Joan's trust in you can never be restored—nor, I fear, can mine."

"Have you nothing to tell me?"

"Nothing! I will not intermeddle with your affairs in the slightest degree. Besides, you owe it to Joan to deal openly and solely with her. Let her clearly understand you; it is all that now remains to you, either of justice or of mercy."

And Mrs. Warrendale turned away with a countenance of such displeasure as never since his childhood had Arthur beheld. How he got through the day he hardly knew; he was certainly in no frame for important business, and after a brief attempt at regaining composure he threw aside the papers he was arranging for his lawyer, and walked off, he scarcely knew whither, till he found himself in the depths of Kensington Gardens. There he flung himself on a bench, and as the place was tolerably deserted he could chew the bitter cud of uneasy thought at his leisure. It was not till the sun showed large and red through the rustling branches that he started up, remembering how great a distance lay between Kensington and Hampstead Heath.

The evening shades were already falling when he was ushered into the library of Chestnut House. Joan was there awaiting him; she had told her household that she was not to be disturbed, that she had private and very important business with Mr. Warrendale. Mrs. Clarke, who quite understood what was to happen, had joined Brenda in the schoolroom, while Laura and Ruby were spending the evening out.

The two who had so lately been plighted lovers stood for a moment facing each other without speaking; then Joan said, very quietly, "What have you to say to me, Arthur?"

Never had Arthur found reply so difficult. At last he faltered—"Can you forgive me, Joan?"

"Forgive you for what? You have not mentioned your fault."

"You know my fault, my most heinous fault. Joan, I do not seek to palliate it, but yet I had some excuse, surely. You do not doubt, I hope, that in perfect good faith I spoke to you at Argendale? You do not hold me as a base deceiver?"

"I hold you a self-deceiver! Arthur, let us be very frank; I have not the time or the strength to waste in fencing with the subject on which we have to speak. Let us come to the point at once—you wish the engagement between us to be cancelled?"

"Not if you wish it otherwise! Joan, I have acted

unjustifiably, I confess ; I have wronged you—wronged you sorely—but I am ready to make all the reparation I can. I return to my allegiance, the dead past shall bury its dead—let things be as they were when we travelled together from Argendale. Let us marry as soon as possible.”

“Do you wish to insult me ?”

“Indeed, I do not. Do not misunderstand me, Joan. I *do* love you, with a love founded on the deepest reverence and esteem. I shall never meet a nobler-minded, purer-hearted woman. Try me, and you shall find me a tender and faithful husband.”

“You love me, you say ; and I believe it, for a lie would never pass your lips, I am assured. But before we go any further, tell me, as in God’s sight, do you love me above all other women ? Had no vows passed between us, no promises been exchanged, would you still come here to-night, and ask me to be your wife ? I want no flattery, no courtesies—I want the truth—the absolute and naked *truth* ! Nay, but you *must* answer.”

“You compel me to speak—almost brutally.”

“Never mind. A sharp stab is kinder, and far more bearable, than repeated thrusts, that fester and rankle slowly into a hidden death-wound. Once more, I conjure you—I demand that you tell me, as solemnly as if you were upon oath, am I your first, best, only love—the one woman in all the world for *you* ?”

“You were—indeed you were, till—one day, I awoke as from a dream, and found that I had mistaken affectionate esteem, friendship, admiration, for the love that comes once, and only once, in a man’s lifetime. And even now——”

“We will leave ‘now’ alone. I am answered ; and you are free. Not to save my life would I marry you, knowing that your heart, your supremest affection, is given to another. No blame will attach to you, for no one will ever know that we were once betrothed. I am so thankful that the engagement was not announced ! I was quite right, you see, when I stipulated for silence ; only *prudent*, when I bade you leave the ‘settlements’ for the present ! There are no revelations that must be made, no awkward

explanations; curiously enough, no one has guessed our secret. Excepting your mother,—and, I think, old Margery,—no one has been told the truth, save one person, in whom I have the most implicit confidence. So, Arthur, your way is plain before you."

"What way? What do your words infer?"

"Nothing at present. I only set you free—free as air, as far as I am concerned. But I suppose there is something further to be said—a wound only partially probed can never be satisfactorily healed. I must speak of my sister, Ruby!"

"I have not uttered to her one word of love."

"Of course not; I never suspected you of such baseness, situated as we were—you and I and Ruby. But love's tale can be told without audible speech. Who should know that better than I? My child—all unwitting of the bonds that now are broken—made the grand discovery that you thought of *her*! She is still a child, but she had an offer of marriage while she was in Guernsey, and that, I imagine, awoke her womanhood, and taught her what love might be. You took her innocent heart by storm, and she did not know it; her girlish imagination was charmed, and she trusted you as *my* dear friend. I fear—I greatly fear—you have done, though not designedly, I believe, what never can be undone on this side death."

"Do you mean to tell me that Ruby cares for me?"

"It is not your fault if she do not, Arthur. *I fear she does.* I fear you have thoughtlessly, yet hopelessly, overshadowed that sweet child's happy life."

"Ruby is lost to me, I know; I felt that from the first. She would never consent to take her sister's place."

"She will never know what that place was to have been. She will never guess that I once had claims on you; that you and I spoke love's language on the lonely Earnseat shore; nor that, by mutual consent, we cancelled all the past. No one will ever know, if you can keep your own counsel, and if your mother consents to silence. I can answer for Maud Clarke, the sole person in my confidence."

"But what will Ruby not infer if we meet no more?"

"I did not say you might meet no more. I have no right to dispose of my sister's life; she must choose for herself—but *not yet*. She is too young to fix her lot—far too young—only in her seventeenth year."

"Yet, still——"

"Yet, still *some day* you may plead your cause with Ruby, and, in legal phrase, 'without prejudice.' She will never dream of what has passed between you and me. After to-day our mutual past will be a sealed book, never to be reopened in this world. You and I cannot marry now; there is a gulf fixed between us which can never be bridged over. But there is no reason why you and Ruby should not find your happiness in each other—in time to come. For the present you must part—we must all part; only I shall correspond with your mother, who is dearer and more precious to me than ever, since I knew that there were to be no further relations between us."

"I believe you always loved my mother better than you loved myself."

"You can think so, if you choose," answered Joan, with the first perceptible tinge of bitterness in her tone; "it matters little *now* what you think of my love. Whether I loved you more or less can be nothing to you henceforward. I *did* love you in the past, and that is enough. You and I will never talk any more of mutual affection; this evening ends it, and for ever."

"For ever, Joan?"

"Yes, for ever, as between us two. In the days to come I meet you as Ruby's sister and guardian—*alone*."

"And when will those 'days to come' begin?"

"When I am satisfied that you have not made another 'mistake.' Ruby's life shall not be wrecked by me in any fashion. I will not stand in her way—God forbid!—neither will I trust her future to one whose stability I have had just cause to doubt. For one whole year you must be a stranger to Ruby—to all of us."

"But what will Ruby think of the estrangement?"

"Leave that to me. Ruby shall think no ill of you, and she shall not despair of meeting you again at some not very distant period. In a few months' time some

other may have won your fancy, and you may think of the child Ruby as you thought of the old maid Joan—it was a *mistake*. Or—Ruby herself may smile at the innocent *penchant* which now, perhaps, she dignifies by the name of an attachment.”

CHAPTER XLVIII.

RUBY'S DISAPPOINTMENT.

“She only said the day is dreary ;
He cometh not, she said.”

THE next day Arthur Warrendale went back to Dunham Tower, recalled—as he told his friends—by imperative business, and for a season his feet trod the familiar paths of Hampstead Heath no more. When Ruby came home on the evening of his last visit he had long departed, and she was told that Joan had gone to bed very poorly with a bad headache, and did not wish to be disturbed.

“Poor darling Mammie !” said the girl, tenderly ; “she is quite overdone. This sad affair of Frank’s has tried her dreadfully, and now poor Ada’s death has completely upset her. Has she been long in bed ?”

“About an hour,” said Mrs. Clarke, to whom Ruby had addressed herself. “Do not speak to her when you go into the room, and if you can manage with so dim a light, do not turn on the gas.”

“Oh, I could undress in the dark, very well ; I will take care not to disturb her. I wonder whether——”

“Whether what, Ruby ?”

“Oh, nothing of any consequence. I was only thinking Mr. Warrendale might have come up this evening ; he is not generally so long away.”

“He was here three days ago, my dear, and that is not so very long. You know we settled that gentlemen’s too frequent visits at a house like this were not expedient.

There is so much prudence required in conducting such an establishment as Chestnut House, the more so that you have now so many elder pupils."

"Yes, two of them are older than myself. I think I like the juniors best. Maud, I am afraid I am very naughty; I am getting so tired of this everlasting school-work, it becomes more uninteresting and more irksome every day. I never took to it *con amore*, as Joan and Brenda have, but since I came back from St. Brelade's I have—well, almost *hated* it!"

"That is a pity, since it is your *work*, your common daily duty. And if you gave it up, I do not see what you could do instead."

"Nor I either, though I sometimes think anything would suit me better than teaching. There are so few things that women can do, Maud."

"I am not so sure of that, Ruby; one can always find something to do, though perhaps not the thing one would choose. And so young as you are, my dear, and so pretty too, I may say—for I am not one of those over-prudent people who think a girl's personal attractions should never be mentioned—your safest work is certainly that which is given you to do in the shelter of your own home, and under loving, wise protection."

"I know it; I am convinced of it. I wish I had not got into this discontented frame of mind! I *must* strive against it. I think they all spoiled me at St. Brelade's."

"You are not regretting your answer to Mr. Macdonald?"

"No, no, indeed! If he were ten times richer, and ten times nicer than he is, and if he came again to-morrow, I should still have the same answer for him."

"What were your objections to him?"

"Simply that I cared literally nothing about him! It was very kind of him to ask me, I suppose—Joan says the highest compliment a man can pay a woman is to propose to her—earnestly and gravely as Mr. Macdonald did to me; but I could not think of him in that way, not if I tried for all the rest of my life. Except that he is Agnes's brother, I feel scarcely any interest in him."

"He told me he hoped you would reconsider your deci-

sion; he thought he had been premature. He fancied you were a year older than you are; it might be, he said, that absent from him you would think more kindly of him."

"No, no, indeed; it can never be. I was sure that I was right when I wrote to him at St. Brelade's, I am surer now. Better a life of weary, grinding, schoolroom toil, than a marriage of expediency."

"Far better, Ruby, my dear. There is no reason why you should look despondently at your future, you are only just emerging into womanhood, and your life is all before you. You cannot tell what good things your God has in store for you."

"No, indeed; and I ought to be ashamed of myself. I do not know what has come over me, Maud; but ever since I came back, I have had such a restless, almost dissatisfied feeling, and I am listless and spiritless when I really wish to be doing my best. But do not say anything to Mammie just now, she has had so many worries. I will tell her all about it, I will 'fess myself as soon as she is quite well again."

And then Ruby went off to bed, remarking that the sooner "Mammie" and she were shut in for the night the better, and Laura had already gone to her room. But, as she crossed the hall she saw a light burning in Mrs. Bray's little parlour, and looked in to ask the question which somehow Mrs. Clarke had omitted to answer. And yet, when she was fairly opposite the good woman and her array of newly-labelled jars, she hesitated to ask it. Mrs. Bray looked up over her spectacles and smiled at the sight of her favourite. "Well, Miss Ruby, and you are safe home again? Had you a pleasant evening?"

"Not very, it was rather dull, and I could not sing; I was out of voice. Joan has a bad headache, they tell me."

"Yes, Miss Ruby dear, and you will be very quiet, I am sure. I hope Miss Carisbroke is asleep. There is nothing like a good sleep for the head, and if one does get comfortably off it is very bad to be disturbed."

"I will be as quiet as a mouse, trust me. But I don't like Joan having these headaches; she never used to have them."

"She has been so much tried of late; it upset her a

good deal bringing her home from Argendale all in such a hurry, and now poor Mrs. Carisbroke's death has just been what people call the last straw on the camel's back!"

"What has she been doing since we went to Mrs. Dormer's?"

"I really don't know, I have been so busy finishing off these preserves, and entering them in my book. Oh! Mr. Warrendale came on business—particular business."

"On particular business—Mr. Warrendale?" And a deep rose-flush dyed Ruby's lovely face, even her neck and the tips of her slender fingers were glowing as Mrs. Bray again surveyed her through her spectacles.

"And why not Mr. Warrendale?" replied the matron; "has he not been managing all Mr. Carisbroke's affairs lately? And he might have some other business besides. I only know that he was expected, for the mistress gave orders that she should on no account be disturbed while Mr. Warrendale was with her."

And to tell the truth, Mrs. Bray was privately hoping that Arthur had come to the Heath that evening on very especial business indeed. No doubt, there were affairs of Mr. Frank's still to be settled, and there was the funeral, of course; but might he not have something to say on his own account—something in which her dear Miss Ruby was very closely connected?

Ruby on her part hoped he had brought her an invitation to Harley Street. She was very greatly surprised at not receiving it personally from Mrs. Warrendale the evening before; at any rate, though, she had learned what she wanted to know, and that without asking directly. She went on her way to her room in a more satisfied frame of mind, while Mrs. Bray soliloquised: "Pretty creature, I am sure she cares! Girls don't blush like that, except for one reason. And as for *him*, there can't be two opinions about it; he worships the very ground she walks upon—it was love at first sight, and that's the truest sort of love, after all, I do believe. Well! it's just as I expected; I thought how it would be when he saw her, and found what a beautiful young woman she had grown into, and he saving her life years ago when she was a child! The moment I set eyes on him I felt sure he was made for Miss

Ruby and she for him. I wonder if Miss Carisbroke sees it now. Miss Brenda don't, I fancy ; but then she never is very quick at noticing things out of the school-room. I think Mrs. Clarke, and Miss Clarke, too, both have a notion which way the wind blows ! ”

Meanwhile Ruby went softly into the room where Joan was lying. The curtains were drawn at the head of the bed ; the gas was turned down so low that the chamber was almost dark. Ruby undressed with scarcely a sound, but she could not help a little rustle, as she put aside the silk skirt she had been wearing. Joan was not asleep, and was perfectly aware of her child's presence in the room ; she had not intended to speak, or move, or make any sign which should betray her watchful condition, but suddenly something prompted her to say, “ Is that you, Ruby ? ”

“ Yes, Mammie, dear ! Have I disturbed you ? ”

“ No, love, I was not asleep. I have not slept at all.”

“ And is your head better ? ”

“ Not much—not at all, indeed. Give me some water, please. And there is some medicine that Maud mixed for me on the table. You had better turn on the gas.”

Ruby obeyed, and when the medicine was given and replaced, she stooped down to kiss her sister. “ Now, I am not going to let you talk, Mammie darling ; just one kiss, and good-night, and then I will put down the gas again and make haste into bed.”

“ Yes, dear ; but first I want to look at you. Stand more in the light, where I can see you well.”

“ And why do you want to look at me to-night of all nights, Mammie darling ? ”

“ I want to impress upon myself the fact that my little Ruby has really grown-up. There, let your hair stay as it is ; don't put it up again. Yes ; I see that my child is a woman—or almost one. My merry little girl is gone—gone for ever.”

“ Are you sorry, Mammie ? ”

“ I am afraid I am. Mothers like to keep their babies as long as they can, you know ! Mrs. Dormer told me how sorry she was when the last little one grew into a big one and wanted to be married.”

"Oh, but I am not wanting to be married—not at present, certainly. And, Mammie, I am going to assert my grown-up condition by scolding you. There was I, told to slip into bed in the dark as noiselessly as a pussy-cat, that your sleep might not be broken, and here are you sitting up with your cheeks on fire, and your eyes shining like big stars, talking away as if you were going to make a night of it! Now, I am not going to encourage such imprudence, so I shall just give you another kiss, tuck you up, and refuse to say another word. Good-night, Miss Carisbroke."

And the next moment the gas was lowered to the least visible point, and Ruby had glided to her own side of the room. Presently, all was silence in the house, and Joan, utterly worn out, fell asleep, and did not awake till quite late in the morning, for Ruby, starting up betimes as the sunbeams stole through the blinds, set off on a tour through the house, rousing all the sleepers, and informing them that it was time to rise, and that no getting-up bell would be rung, in order that Miss Carisbroke might rest on undisturbed.

But the first school-bell was rung as usual, and by Joan herself, declaring that her head was much better, and that she could play the invalid no longer. "Do not ask me to nurse myself," she said, a little later, to Mrs. Clarke; "the best thing I can do is to go straight ahead with my customary work. Indeed, I am quite fit for it. I dread, above all things, sitting down to brood. For the present there is no need of any kind of action on Ruby's account; let us go on as if this interlude had not occurred; I must take up my ordinary life just where I left it when I accepted the invitation to Dunham Tower. And then there is the funeral. I must keep up for that; I must follow poor Ada to the grave."

"What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, dear, thank you; unless, perhaps, you will undertake a little shopping for us. We have made up our minds, as you know, not to wear actual mourning; still, we shall not care to appear in coloured raiment just yet. We have engaged Miss Sewall to come here and do up what simple black we have, and to trim our bonnets

and Ruby's chip hat ; but we shall require black gloves and ribbons, besides little things that Miss Sewall will be sure to need, and if you or Laura will attend to them we shall be obliged."

"I could take a class for you, at a pinch ; I am certain you are not fit to be in the schoolroom."

"I think it is best for me to be at my post. No, dear Maud, do not look so pitifully at me. I can bear it ! Please talk to me about anything and everything save myself ; I shall try to forget myself, and be absorbed in my duties. I think I shall give the first class a series of lectures on English History, it will occupy my mind to prepare them ; and I am going to the Pattersons this afternoon to have a talk with Cousin Richard and Annie ; they have agreed to make all necessary arrangements ; but I want to know what is to become of the children after the funeral."

And Joan went accordingly to Hampstead Road. It was not a very long journey, and the fresh air, as she walked across the Heath to the omnibus, seemed to do her good. Nevertheless, Cousin Richard thought she looked "very badly, and quite out of sorts." And Mrs. Richard knew her liver was out of order, and she certainly ought to have advice before there was any further derangement ! Somehow, Joan felt it a relief to be in the comfortable parlour behind the shop ; it was good to see fresh faces and different scenes, and to talk over family matters among themselves. But it was not so good when Mrs. Richard, in all innocence, asked :—"And how is Mr. Warrendale, and when did you see him last ? I tell my Dick I quite fell in love with him."

"Dick is not alarmed, I am pretty certain," said Joan, with a ghastly attempt at a smile. "Mr. Warrendale came up to Chestnut House last night and said good-bye ; he returns to Argendale to-day, and to-morrow there is some business about the forthcoming election to which he must attend."

"Ah ! yes," put in Richard. "I understand that ; the member for Fellshire is dead, and Mr. Warrendale is, of course, one of the principal gentlemen in the county. I suppose he will be back again soon."

"I do not know, or, rather, I think not. He spoke of going to see his sister at Heidelberg."

"Rather a sudden move, is it not? What do you think, Cousin Joan? It came into my mind the other day that you and he could not do better than make a match of it. He thinks a heap of you, I am sure. He spoke of you in the highest terms, as I told you, Nancy."

"There, there! that will do," hastily interrupted Nancy, her quick woman's perception discerning on the instant that Joan did not like the turn the conversation had taken. "Really, Richard, you are always making up a match for somebody; you'll put your foot into it some of these days, as sure as sure can be! But men are so ridiculous, ain't they, Miss Carisbroke?"

"Sometimes," assented Joan, faintly. "Now, Mr. Patterson, let us talk business, if you please, for I want to be home before dark, and the evenings are beginning to draw in. What is arranged about the children?"

"Well, I've made up my mind, since Annie has no objection, to take the eldest lad myself, and give him a good, plain education, and bring him up to business. In five or six years' time he ought to be making himself useful; and our three eldest are girls, you know. He's a pickle, I'm afraid, is Master Franky, but we'll soon bring him into order. He has been regularly spoiled, that's where it is, Cousin Joan. For my part, I can't comprehend how parents can be so foolish—so much worse than foolish—as to make their children regular nuisances to everybody but themselves."

"It is very kind of you and Annie to undertake him, for he does seem to be singularly troublesome for his age. His Aunt Lucilla was nearly at her wits' end the other day on his account."

"Lucy, like Ada, never had any gift at managing children, but my Nancy is quite the other way; *ours* are as well-behaved as any boys and girls in London, though I say it that shouldn't say it; and it's all owing to their mother there, who has brought them up sensibly and piously from their cradles. As we had decided to adopt the lad, we both thought the sooner he came to us the better, so I mean to bring him here directly after the funeral."

"And the others?"

"Ethelinda remains for the present with her aunts, and Dolf and Reggie may as well stay on as they are a little longer, for I find I have the house at Laburnum Place on my hands till Michaelmas. I don't quite see what is to be done with them when the aunts go back to their lodgings."

"We must inquire about a suitable school for them; and as to Ethelinda—let us call her Ethel—she will remain with Rosamond and Lucilla till she is nine or ten years old, and then we must find her a place in the schoolroom at Chestnut House."

"Ah, we shall manage it between us. When sensible, right-minded people pull together, difficulties, sooner or later, disappear. But I am forgetting one thing,—do you know our Cousin Gregory?"

"I do not at all; but I believe I have heard of him. Who is he, Cousin Richard?"

"He is a Patterson, and that is about all I can tell you. He and my father were equally related to your mother, I fancy; and I've heard my father say that he was once upon a time in love with his cousin Louisa, but she would not have a word to say to him. She had set her mind against marrying anybody in business. Besides, she had a tidy little income of her own, and she had no notion of bestowing it upon anybody poorer than herself. Gregory wasn't exactly well-to-do in those days, though he has got on since, they tell me. He must be over seventy now, I should say. Well, Cousin Joan, he wants to see *you*."

"I did not know he was aware of my existence. I had quite forgotten his."

"He has kept himself pretty well posted up in the family chronicles, it seems. He knows more about us than we know about him, I fancy. Anyhow, he means to attend the funeral—and he might—it's just possible!—he *might* take it into his head to put Dolf or Reggie to school, for he has no children or grandchildren of his own, as he never married. And he is not by any means in needy circumstances, father says, though he could scarcely be called wealthy. But particularly he wants to see Cousin Joan—poor Cousin Louisa's own daughter!"

"Brenda and Ruby are equally their mother's daugh-

ters. Why should he wish to see me more than my sisters?"

"That I cannot tell. It was *you* whom he inquired for. I was to tell you that he wanted to meet you face to face—those were his very words. And having delivered my message, I have nothing further to say."

"I am afraid he will be disappointed, for I am not in the least like my mother. Brenda resembles her a good deal; she and Netta were always supposed to take after her. Frank, too, features her, as people say; but the rest of us are out-and-out Carisbrokes."

Joan declared that her visit to the Pattersons had done her good, and she insisted on busying herself about all sorts of things, when, quite in the dusk, she returned to Chestnut House. Two days afterwards the funeral took place, and poor Ada was laid—as she had desired—in the suburban churchyard beside her father and mother, and a little brother who died in infancy. Mr. Gregory Patterson made his appearance, and was introduced to both Joan and Brenda—it was thought better that Ruby should not attend; and afterwards he told Cousin Richard that Joan was not a bit like her mother, almost as unlike her as she could be; but she was none the worse for that, for Louisa Patterson was never over-wise, nor over-pretty, though he had been sweet upon her once, when he was nothing better than a foolish overgrown boy. And Miss Joan was certainly very handsome, though she did look so ill; and a very fine figure of a woman, such as any man might be proud to see sitting at the head of his table! Brenda was more like poor Louie—but an improved edition; he should say she had ten times the sense of her mother; but then she had been brought up in the school of adversity, and that was an advantage!

But though Richard Patterson brought both Dolf and Reggie before his notice, and expatiated on the desirability of their being put to some good school, he did not take the hint, merely replying that school was always best for boys—more especially for those who thought too much of themselves, and then pointedly changing the subject of conversation.

After this all things seemed to return to their accustomed

channels at Chestnut House, and in another week Mrs. Clarke and her daughter were departing for their own home, which was at length ready for their reception. Much as Joan loved Maud, she was not sorry to see her go, for now no one remained who knew anything of the fight and struggle in which she was engaged. She thought she could bear her trouble better if she were quite alone, and if there were no kind, wistful eyes watching her from hour to hour.

Ruby was certainly not herself. She was more listless than ever; she went through her duties mechanically, and was now and then as cross as her naturally sweet temper permitted. She gave way to little bursts of pettishness, always followed by the most genuine contrition; she was frequently found alone, and more than once Joan was sure she detected traces of tears on her fair face.

The truth was poor Ruby missed unceasingly the pleasure and excitement of Arthur Warrendale's visits. His continued absence created a blank that first amazed and then frightened her, for all at once it dawned upon her that he—*he* had made the happiness of her life ever since that evening when he had found her reading in Joan's place at the library window. And now he was gone, and there was no talk of his coming back again; indeed, there was no talk at all about him, for his name was scarcely ever mentioned, only once or twice Brenda said they seemed to have altogether lost sight of Mr. Warrendale. And then Ruby asked herself, What could it mean? He was changed even before he went away, and then he never even took leave of her! He said good-bye to Joan, but he left no message for *her*; or else Joan had forgotten it, and Ruby was far too proud to make the most indirect inquiry. And the promise of the visit to Harley Street, to which Joan had once consented, that seemed to have faded into nothingness. It was certainly very strange, quite inexplicable! Had anything come suddenly between them and the Warrendales? Had Mrs. Warrendale taken a dislike to her that evening, when she had received her in the absence of her sisters? Yes! that must be it, for all was changed since then, everything had gone wrong from that time, and the poor child worried herself with

weary self-questionings as to what she had said or done, so utterly to repel and displease Arthur's mother.

At last came a partial break in the impenetrable mist that had closed around her. Mrs. Warrendale wrote, asking her to spend a day in Harley Street, and her spirits revived, for something seemed to tell her that Arthur would be there; he must certainly have returned from Fellshire, for the election of which she had read in the newspapers was over, and the candidate whom he supported was returned. She felt nearly confident she would meet him in his own house, at the time appointed. Curiously enough, she asked no question, she never breathed Arthur Warrendale's name, and that alone told Joan how deep an impression had been made, since, up to a certain period, he had been continually quoted.

The day so counted upon arrived, and never had Ruby been so particular about her toilet: she went to Mrs. Dormer's for some choice flowers, and she begged Joan to let her buy some ruchings for her plain black silk dress.

"I do not think there will be any visitor beside yourself, my dear," said Joan, as she saw her making some of her preparations; "you need not take so much trouble; I think there will be no party."

"I did not expect one," replied Ruby, colouring as she spoke; "there will be only Mrs. Warrendale, I suppose, and—perhaps—Mr. Warrendale."

"I have every reason to believe that Mr. Warrendale is in Germany."

"Ah!" and there was a change of countenance, a little quivering sigh that sent a pang to the elder sister's heart. But perhaps, after all, Joan might be mistaken, Ruby told herself; and she set off, under the care of Mademoiselle, in excellent spirits.

Mrs. Warrendale received her affectionately, and talked to her about everybody and everything *but* Arthur! Luncheon was announced, and the table was only set for two; still, he might put in an appearance later in the afternoon! Her hopes, however, were quickly doomed to death.

Mrs. Kingdon was mentioned, and, after some conversation about her, Mrs. Warrendale remarked: "She is

enjoying her brother's visit extremely, and as he does not purpose returning to England before the winter, we are hoping that Minnie will accompany him with one or both of her children, and remain at Dunham Tower, till Mr. Kingdon comes himself to keep Christmas, and take them back."

"Yes, I suppose so," was Ruby's somewhat irrelevant rejoinder; she could scarcely repress her tears, so intense was her feeling of disappointment. Mrs. Warrendale perceived her embarrassment, and pitied her most sincerely. And again she wished that events had been so ordered that Arthur and Ruby had met before there had been any idea of Joan as Arthur's wife.

The day passed away very quietly, and but for the shadow on Ruby's heart it would have passed happily. On the whole, she was glad that she knew for certain where Arthur was, and that she need not expect him from day to day. How very foolish she had been, thinking that he would surely return to see *her*! And she was afraid she had been not only silly but naughty, for she knew she had been cross and fractious, and very far from industrious; and she recalled with remorse the remembrance of certain exercises of the junior class, for which she was responsible, and which had been allowed to accumulate uncorrected, till Joan found it necessary to take them in hand herself.

Altogether, Ruby went home in an improved state of mind, determined not to waste any more time in weak and vain regrets. That night, before she lay down in bed, she gave Joan an unusual hugging, together with her usual kiss, and said—"I am afraid, Mammie, I have been a very naughty girl; I have been idle and ill-tempered and ridiculous ever since we came back from Guernsey. But I am going to turn over a new leaf, indeed I am! I mean to work well in the schoolroom, and go on with my own studies as well; it was a shame to leave you all those exercises, and you so busy, and so poorly besides. When do you think you will get better, Mammie—*quite* better?"

"I am better, dear," said Joan, tenderly, "much better; but I do not think I am as strong as I ought to be.

Yes, Ruby darling, set to work with a will. When one is at all out of spirits or weary in mind, or discontented, there is no better cure, under God's blessing, than good, straightforward, plodding work, and plenty of it."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE VICTORY WON.

"In heavenly love abiding
No change my heart shall fear ;
And safe is such confiding—
For nothing changes here ;
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid,
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed ?"

It was full time for Ruby to rouse herself, for the hour was close at hand when all her energies would be taxed to the utmost. A day or two after her visit to Harley Street, the sisters were a little surprised at the sudden appearance of Mr. Richard Patterson. Morning school was just over, and Joan, Brenda, and Ruby were sitting together, rather tired with several hours' uninterrupted work among the pupils, who were all just trooping down the chestnut avenue, under the superintendence of Mademoiselle and the junior governess, setting forth to take their customary noontide walk.

Richard had lately undertaken to supply the Misses Carisbroke's establishment with various comestibles in which he traded, and Mrs. Bray declared that never since she took to housekeeping had she been accommodated with such bacon and such fowls, such butter and such eggs,—to say nothing of the wonderful sausages—at prices that were the reverse of exorbitant ! Joan's first idea was that Mr. Patterson had arrived on business—and

so he had, but on far other business than that of which she thought.

"I dare say you are surprised to see me, Cousin Joan and Cousin Brenda, at this busy time of the day," began the gentleman; "but something happened this morning: that is to say, Lucilla Cook brought me a letter from Laburnum Place, that I felt you ought to see without delay, and it seemed easier to come and tell you myself than to write about it, for I am not much of a scribe, neither is my little woman at home,—indeed, Nancy said to me directly she had read the letter, 'Now the best thing and the only thing for you to do, Richard, is to go and take off that apron, and catch the first omnibus to Hampstead Heath, and so break the news to your cousins, for it will be a shock to them, for all that has come and gone between us all and that poor, misguided fellow.'"

And then Richard paused for his far from impromptu preamble to take effect. He and his Annie had carefully framed the speech he was to make as an introduction to the tidings he had to impart, and they flattered themselves that it would break the ice most admirably.

As indeed it did. There could be but one interpretation to Richard's words, and Joan at once answered, "You bring us bad news of Frank?"

"Well, yes," replied Richard, trying to look as unconcerned as he possibly could. "It seems he was unwell on the voyage, and when he landed at New York he fell in with a very bad set, who seemed to think of nothing but how to feast and revel and spend their money. He was taken very ill several weeks after his arrival—some kind of fever, evidently, for all his boon companions at once deserted him, and he was left to the tender mercies of an old harpy of a lodging-house woman, who nursed him very much after the fashion of Sairey Gamp. Fortunately—I ought to say *providentially*—there appeared upon the scene, when things were at the worst, a good Christian minister, who had, by the merest chance, as it seemed, heard of Fred Carey's desolate and almost hopeless condition—Fred Carey was the name Frank assumed, it appears, when he fled the country. This good man took matters completely into his own hand. Frank was delirious, and

could do nothing for himself, but he talked incessantly about his wife and children, and sometimes entreated an imaginary person to write to his sister Joan to let her know he was dying. The Rev. Mr. Ellison sent in both doctor and nurse, and, as far as the illness was concerned, I should say the poor fellow had every chance. But it was too late; he was too far gone; his intemperate habits had quite undermined his constitution; and he confessed towards the last that he had spent his time in one continuous drinking-bout from the day he set foot on the New York quay till sickness overpowered him. The doctor gave little hope from the beginning; the nurse, an experienced, Christian woman, gave none; but both tried hard to pull him through. It was all in vain; when the disease was conquered, he sank rapidly. But before he died, his full senses returned, and he knew that he was on the brink of the grave. He opened his mind to Mr. Ellison and to Mrs. Barstow. He seems to have gone back to the days when he was a lad at Perrywood; to his career at Oxford; to the time of his first coming to live in London. He told them all his shortcomings and his sins—all his follies and his shame. He seems not to have spared himself in the narration. All his moan was that he had wasted every opportunity, that he had sinned against light, and fought against conviction. He confessed to these kind friends his real reasons for leaving England, and told them that, in spite of his apparently destitute condition, he had three hundred pounds safely lodged in a certain bank, under the name of Frederic Carey. He directed that this money should be remitted to me, to whom it lawfully belonged. Last of all he dictated a letter to poor Ada, bidding her adieu, asking her forgiveness, and beseeching her to take his sister Joan's advice concerning the children, and bring them up to be the reverse of what their father had been!"

Joan's eyes were streaming by this time, and Richard ceased his mournful tale.

"Come now, cousin Joan," he began, with a very suspicious moisture on his own lids, "it is of no use to fret! and really I don't know that a better thing could have happened. He was penitent, you see; and all his cry was,

‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’ He did not die steeped in his iniquity, as might well have been. We may hope, I think. We don’t know what those last hours might have done, what might have passed between his soul and the merciful Father whom he had so greatly offended. It seems to me as if nothing short of being brought face to face with death would ever have caused him to repent—that is, genuinely. He would have gone on, perhaps—most probably, indeed—bringing shame on his family, and being an anxiety to all connected with him.”

“We could not possibly grieve as if it were one of our sisters in Australia,” said Brenda. “Frank has never been anything to us but a trouble and an anxiety; still, he was kind to Netta and to me when we were tiresome, naughty children in the old schoolroom at Perrywood. I hope God has forgiven him.”

“We must leave him in our Father’s hands,” interrupted Joan, who seemed unable to bear any discussion on the subject. “We have a Saviour who is mighty and merciful to save, who has promised to reject none who truly seek Him: that must be our great hope and consolation.”

“And to think poor Ada was a widow, and never knew it!” continued Brenda. “I suppose, Cousin Richard, the letter was addressed to her?”

“Yes, it came by last night’s latest post, and Rosamond opened it. Lucilla was at my house this morning at nine o’clock. Now, I should think, we might get those two boys into an orphan asylum.”

The shock was great to the sisters, especially to Joan and to Ruby, whom he had petted years ago as much as was in his selfish, self-centred nature. Brenda, characteristically, took it more calmly. Still, no one could help feeling that it was a relief to know that there was no further cause for dread; and there seemed something like a tangible hope for the future of the children now that no adverse influence could be made to bear upon their career.

And so Frank Carisbroke died, and was buried among strangers in the beautiful cemetery of Mount Auburn, and except to the few who had the misfortune to be his near relations, his memory has perished from the earth.

So surely does sin bring its own punishment, so truly hard is the way of transgressors !

When Uncle Ben heard of his death, he came forward and offered to take permanent charge of the second boy. His step-children were all growing up satisfactorily, and were pretty well out of hand, and Mrs. Ben was quite willing to do her best for the orphan, remembering the days when her own little ones were fatherless and destitute. Then an attempt was made to place Reggie in an orphan school, and, by dint of unprecedented efforts on the part of every living Patterson, Cook, and Carisbroke, the little boy was duly elected, within a few months of his father's death.

And now ensued a period of absorbing though uneventful labour for the sisters at Chestnut House. The winter quarter brought them a large increase of pupils, for their school was becoming celebrated ; their house was now quite full, and several persons were waiting for expected vacancies at the Christmas recess. One of the governesses proved unsatisfactory, and quite unequal to her work ; Brenda became confused when her energies were overtaxed, and though Ruby put her shoulder to the wheel, and did her very best, a great deal of extra toil and responsibility naturally devolved on Joan, who had been overwrought for a long while past. The end of the half-year brought with it the usual repetitions and examinations, involving a great deal of increased labour ; for though Joan's system was decidedly superior, in those days, she still adhered to many of the old plans, which modern governesses affirm to be far more laborious than satisfactory.

Joan herself declared that she *liked* the bustle, she never seemed to tire, her energies never flagged, she almost frightened Ruby by her careless, unwearying application to duty, and even Brenda mildly remonstrated and told her she would break down before the holidays, if she did not spare herself. But Joan only replied that she did not feel *much* tired ; she had got into the spirit of the thing, and must go on to the end. It was already the first week in December, and less than a fortnight would leave them their house to themselves. Then she would rest, and be

as idle as they could wish ; she meant to have a real quiet, lazy vacation, doing nothing that she could help, and going nowhere to visit ! And with this promise Brenda and Ruby were obliged to be content. "Only," said Brenda to Mrs. Bray, "she looks so feverish, she seems to be going on as if she were wound up to a certain pitch, and could not slacken pace till the machinery ran down."

And Mrs. Bray shook her head, and replied, "I've begged her to give in before it's too late, but it's of no use, Miss Joan *won't* be said ! She's up early and down late, and in every place at once, it seems to me. I shall be truly thankful when breaking-up day is over, and the last of the young ladies is fetched away. And then she'll be regularly knocked down, and have to go to bed to keep her Christmas, as you will see, Miss Brenda ! A racehorse can't keep on for ever."

But breaking-up day had not arrived when Mrs. Bray's prophecy began to be accomplished. One morning, just a week before the holidays, Joan, who had been reading "Competition Themes" before breakfast by gaslight, suddenly startled her class by slipping down amongst them in a dead fainting fit. All was confusion and affright, especially when it was found that the attack did not yield to the ordinary remedies. Dr. Parker was sent for, and, after some examination of his patient, looked extremely serious.

"I am afraid you are in for a long spell of nursing, Miss Brenda," he said. "Miss Carisbroke is very ill, and will continue so for the present. I think I would advise you to dismiss the school as speedily as possible."

"This day week is our proper breaking-up."

"Change the day to to-morrow, and write to the parents immediately. The London girls may be fetched away to-night—some of them, at least."

"Do you fear infection ?"

"I cannot say at present precisely what I fear, but there is a great deal of fever. This illness has been impending for weeks ; it will be wiser on every account to clear the house of the pupils."

Dr. Parker's counsel was taken, and in twenty-four hours Chestnut House was left to the invalid and her

nurses ; the pianos were all closed, the great schoolroom silent, and the servants went about treading softly and speaking under their breath. In a day or two the Doctor was able to decide that the fever was *not* infectious, but the patient was about as ill as she could be, and needed the most unremitting attention, the tenderest, most careful nursing, if they were to cherish hopes of her recovery. No, it was not that the fever was of so very bad a kind, but that Miss Carisbroke was in no state to combat with disease ; she had evidently overworked herself, and gone on long after she ought to have taken rest. There had been certainly an undue tension of mind ; there had been much mental strain and struggle, which, combined with the incessant and increased school work, had terminated in complete prostration of nervous power.

"What you say is quite true," said Ruby, mournfully. "As an old friend, I may tell you that our poor brother, who died the other day in New York, gave us a great deal of anxiety before he left this country. Indeed, the circumstances of his leaving were most distressing, and Joan, as the head of the family, was greatly troubled. Then she was with Ada, when she died ; altogether she has had a most trying half-year ; she has been worried and grieved, in one way and another, ever since she was hastily summoned from Dunham Tower, where she was spending her summer holidays. Brenda and I did not know till the other day how much trouble poor Frank had caused. She kept the worst part from us."

"Yes, and then tried to drown anxious thought and care in unceasing labour. My only wonder is that she kept up so long ; most women would have succumbed days before."

"But you think there is no actual *danger* ?"

"I cannot say that, for there is great reason for apprehension. All depends, humanly speaking, on the care that is taken of her. I will do my part, and I doubt not you will do yours. When the fever has spent itself, the weakness will be alarming. Take care of yourselves, and share the watch between you ; there will be more than enough for you, and Miss Brenda, and Mrs. Bray to do—I think you had better let me send you a first-class nurse."

To which proposal the sisters at first demurred. But before many days had passed they were glad to avail themselves of it, for Joan did not improve. Dr. Parker wished for "another opinion," as the illness began to develop into rather unlooked-for aspects, and refused to yield to the ordinary treatment.

Christmas was a dreary season to the sisters and their faithful coadjutor, Mrs. Bray; all through the Holy-tide Joan lay seemingly unconscious, and between life and death—it was not till the New Year came in that Dr. Parker dared to bid them rejoice in the first signs of unmistakable amendment. Joan had an excellent constitution, and in spite of much suffering and excessive weakness, it triumphed, so that the third week in January saw her fairly on the road to convalescence.

School duties were resumed a little later than usual, but Joan was not allowed even to think about the pupils. Everything now depended, Dr. Parker assured her, on her taking the long and perfect rest she needed. It would be a sort of penny-wise-and-pound-foolish proceeding to think of returning to the lightest duty till health and strength were perfectly established. And, truth to tell, Joan manifested no desire to take up the work which had so suddenly dropped from her hands. She was miserably feeble and depressed, and she would lie for hours on her couch without speaking—sometimes dozing, sometimes letting the tears, which she could not control, course each other down her pallid cheeks, without making the least effort to wipe them away.

Early in February the winter seemed to break up; ice and snow disappeared, the sun shone brightly and warmly, and the first spring flowers began to peep out in the borders. And Joan must go away, Dr. Parker said; "the sooner she had complete change of scene and air the sooner would she recover strength and return to her accustomed duties." And then arose the question, Where, at this still chilly season, should she go?

While the sisters were debating between several places on the southern coast, there came a letter from Mr. Gregory Patterson to his cousin Joan. He had heard from Richard Patterson all about her illness, and he wanted

her to come and spend a few weeks with him at his house in Sussex. He was getting an old man now, he said, and he should like to see something of his own kindred before he died; he had been thinking a great deal of poor Louisa of late, and nothing in the world would give him so much pleasure as receiving her daughter under his roof for as long a time as she could make it convenient to remain. And she had better bring one of her sisters to bear her company, though he was thankful to say his housekeeper was one of the best nurses living!

Joan at once determined to accept Mr. Gregory's invitation, and take Ruby with her, for she felt unequal just yet to being left alone among strangers. A competent governess was already engaged to fill the chief place in the schoolroom, and there was an efficient junior teacher who could very well undertake Ruby's duties. Brenda must remain to represent the Misses Carisbroke.

It was on a mild, spring-like afternoon that Joan and Ruby reached the station where Cousin Gregory was to meet them; Lindenfield being a good two miles from the railway. He was there, with a comfortable close carriage and pair, and two servants who evidently regarded their master's will as law. From the deference paid to him by the railway officials, his cousins argued that he was a person of consideration in the neighbourhood.

Joan was fatigued, but she had not borne the journey badly, and the sweet, fresh air of the Downs and the lovely scenery greatly refreshed her. She gathered, as they drove along, that Lindenfield was a detached residence standing in its own grounds, and delightfully situated, as well as sheltered from wind and weather. "For, you see, Cousin Joan," said Mr. Gregory, "I am getting an old man—tush! I *am* old, for I was seventy-two last birthday, and I thought it would not do at my age to perch myself up on the hill-tops, as I am apt to be laid up with bronchitis in hard winters. I thought at first of building a snug house to suit myself, but seeing the advertisement of Lindenfield, I came to look at it, and found it so nearly like what I had in my mind's eye, that I went back to town, and set the lawyers to work to inquire into the title and all that sort of thing. Never

buy an estate, Cousin Joan, without making yourself quite sure about *the title* ! But here we are at the lodge-gates. Welcome to Lindenfield, ladies ; may you soon get back your roses, Cousin Joan, and you, my pretty little maid, may you go back as bonnie as you are now, and ever so much happier, for your sojourn in the old man's home."

Lindenfield was a far grander house than the sisters had expected. It stood in a kind of park, through which a river wound its shining way ; all round it were beautifully kept gardens that were lovely now, in spite of leafless trees and stunted sward, and only the first spring-flowers peeping through the rich, loamy soil. What must it not be in summer time, with the roses and lilies in full bloom, and all the beds and borders gay with June and July blossoms ?

"Cousin Gregory must be a very rich man," said Ruby, when she had settled Joan on the luxurious sofa in the deliciously warm, snug sitting-room, which was to be entirely at their own disposal. Beyond the sitting-room was the bedroom, airy and spacious, and supplied with every possible comfort and elegance, and beyond that the dressing-room and bath-room, and in all of them were blazing fires, and all sorts of contrivances to make life pleasant and easy to an invalid.

"I had no idea we were coming to such a mansion," said Joan, nestling among her cushions ; and then they were invaded by a trim, smiling maid, who came bearing the tea-equipage.

"The loveliest old china in the world !" Ruby declared. "On a massive silver tray !"

And here Joan was content to linger for two full months ; and here, as it were, a new life came to her—not the old life renewed, but a new and vigorous existence that seemed ready to meet any difficulty and cope with any storm. In March she wrote to Mrs. Warrendale—for the first time for many months—telling her friend how good God had been to her in restoring her to health and strength, and giving her a courage and joy such as she had never known before.

"I am more than content," she wrote, "that things

should be as they are : I would not now have them otherwise ; Arthur and I—we both deluded ourselves. Do not trouble yourself about me, my dearest friend, my *mother*, for that you must ever be ! I think I see my life before me, and it is just what I would choose, were my destiny in my own hands. I hope I shall be very useful and do good work in this beautiful world, where it has pleased my Heavenly Father I shall still abide for I know not how many years. And when all my tasks are ended, when the day is done and the shadows of evening fall around me, may I hear His voice in the deepening twilight bidding me trust myself in death as in life to Him, and calling me *home* ! My darling Ruby is lovelier than ever ; she has proved her worth during my long, trying illness ; she has been all to me that I could wish, and it gladdens my very soul to find that my precious child is developing into a true-hearted, noble-minded, and thoroughly charming *woman* !”

It was the middle of April when Joan and Ruby went back to London, and on the morning of their departure, Gregory Patterson said, “You have done me good—great good, Cousin Joan ! If I have shown you any kindness, as you say I have, you have repaid me a thousand-fold ; for you have shown me many things which my world-hardened old heart never before comprehended. I thank my God for sending you to Lindenfield, for through you has come to me the great blessing of my life ; and I have a hope and a joy to which hitherto I have been a stranger. Remember, both of you, this is always your home, whenever you choose. I should like to keep you, but I suppose you must go for the present, and you have promised me to come back, and Brenda too, for your Midsummer holidays. So good-bye till the roses are in bloom, dear Cousin Joan, and good-bye, my pretty little Ruby—and remember, both of you, you have made the solitary old man very happy in his declining years.”

And then all settled down again quietly at Chestnut House. Brenda had done wonders, and the school had suffered little, if at all, from the lapse in its wonted administration. Joan set to work more vigorously than ever, and in a little while some of the elder pupils were

heard to say that Miss Carisbroke had always been good and kind and just, but now she was much more than that! She was so tender-hearted, so sympathising, *so full of love*, that school-life was almost too happy; and the girl who could vex or deceive *her* deserved to be put under the hardest, and harshest, and dimmallest of governesses!

And once more the chestnuts were in bloom, and the fragrance of the hawthorn was on the sweet May breeze. And one day Joan received a note from Mrs. Warrendale, dated from Harley Street, asking if it would be convenient for her to come up to the Heath on the following evening, and have a good, long, confidential talk about *everything*! We need not say what was the nature of Joan's reply.

"And you are sure it would not hurt you, Joan?" asked Mrs. Warrendale, somewhat wistfully, when, after nearly an hour's private conversation, there was some talk about Ruby going to Dunham Tower, as soon as they returned to Fellshire. And Joan's answer was, "It would gladden my heart, for I think Arthur and Ruby ought to meet again; and you say he is still in the same mind, still regards my child as the one treasure it concerns his happiness to possess."

"I do think we may trust him most fully. There is no mistake now, I am well assured. Only, Joan dear, it seems barbarous to talk so to you, who suffered so cruelly from the error into which he fell—into which, I am afraid, I helped him to fall, for I was so anxious that he should marry, and so delighted to have you for my daughter! Tell me the truth, Joan—are you really as happy as your letters have implied?"

"I am really happy, dear friend—happier than I believe I should have been as Arthur's wife."

"And yet you loved him, and with the love that only women of deep, true nature know."

"And yet I loved him!—nay, I love him still, though not with the romantic love that grew upon me at Argendale. He must promise me that he will never let Ruby even *guess* how it once was between us; for if she knew, she might, in spite of explanation, feel like a supplanter."

“And your life will not be spoilt, Joan?”

“By God’s help—*no!* *He* has shown me that He has other paths for me to tread than those I chose for myself; He has blessed me in many ways; by His grace I have fought the fight and won the victory; why should the life which He has preserved, and which He crowns with so many mercies, be spoiled? To be the Christian mistress of a Christian household is, I think, the highest honour that can be put upon a woman, and that may still be mine—is mine, indeed. But the very crown of womanhood is doubtless happy wifehood and motherhood. *That* God withholds from some, and He knows best! But some recompense He will surely give, and the life that is lived in Him and for Him must needs be happy. Very well, then, I will tell Ruby that she is coming to you, even before the holidays begin. Brenda and I have promised to spend the entire vacation with Cousin Gregory at Lindenfield.”



CHAPTER L.

THE LADY OF LINDENFIELD.

“My heart is resting, O my God,
My heart is in Thy care—
I hear the voice of joy and health
Resounding everywhere.
‘Thou art my portion,’ saith my soul,
Ten thousand voices say.
And the music of their glad amen
Will never die away.”

THREE weeks later, and Ruby was preparing for her journey to Argendale. Some months earlier she would have been half wild with happy excitement; now, though inwardly satisfied at the turn events had taken, she was outwardly quite calm and self-possessed, and behaved altogether in so sedate a fashion that Mrs. Bray wondered

what had come to her young lady, who seemed half-a-dozen years older than when, in wild, hilarious spirits, she had been getting ready, just twelve months before, to accompany Brenda and the Clarkes to Guernsey.

Joan was very busy in procuring the prettiest dresses for her darling, and she took infinite pleasure in supplying her with sundry little dainty additions to her toilets, such as Ruby had often secretly desired, but never hoped to possess, because they were "unnecessary and expensive."

"Oh, Mammie dear!" she exclaimed as she was arranging the contents of several small boxes from *Marshall and Snellgrove's*, "are you not spending *too* much money upon me? It is delightful to have such pretty, delicate things, but I *could* do without them, you know, and I am afraid I am not worth so much trouble and expense."

"You are worth everything to me, my child," was Joan's reply. "I have nothing in the world so precious as my Ruby. What shall I do when she marries and leaves me?"

"Oh, I shall not marry yet awhile," answered Ruby, the colour, however, flushing her cheeks as she spoke; "not till the Prince himself come by."

"No, not till the Prince himself come by," echoed Joan, fondly stroking the rich, dark curls; "but, Ruby dear, I fancy he *will* come before very long! Much as I should like to keep my little girl, it would make me very happy to see her really—in every sense of the word—*well married*. Even the most unworldly mothers are pleased to see their daughters comfortably 'established'!"

"How we miss her!" said Brenda, when, two evenings later, Mrs. Warrendale had come and taken her to Harley Street, which they were to leave on the morrow for Argendale. Arthur was already at Dunham Tower awaiting his visitors. "And," she continued, confidentially, "it has come into my mind—though, on second thoughts, I believe a word or two of Mrs. Bray's put it there—that Mr. Warrendale *might* fancy our child! She is so very lovely, and so very good, and Mrs. Warrendale seems very fond of her—though not so fond as she is of you, Joan dear. It would be an excellent match in every point of view, would it not?"

"That it would," replied Joan, heartily. "To tell you the truth, I have thought the same myself; only, dear, I think we had better not speak of such a probability, even to each other; and if Mrs. Bray is disposed to talk, we will not give her any encouragement. You and I will wait silently, and see what comes to pass."

"Of course," returned Brenda, with her most sagacious air; "but I perceive you do not feel that such a happy event is at all *impossible*; and I wanted to know your mind on the subject. Now I am satisfied, and will say no more till the good time comes."

Ruby had been at Dunham Tower about a week, when one evening she set forth with her host and his mother for a long walk among the flowery lanes of Argendale. How happy she was, enjoying the lovely scenery, and drinking in the pure, balmy air, exhilarating as champagne, and, doubtless, much more healthful. And how delighted with the handful of honeysuckle she gathered for herself from the winding hedgerows as they passed. By-and-by they came out upon the heath—that heath now so memorable to both Joan and Arthur. Many a fruitless search had been made there for the lost "Warrendale Circlet," and it was now concluded that it really had rolled down the slippery slope of short, fine turf and limestone rock to the shore below, whence the tide had washed it away, or, perchance, buried it deep among the shingle. Both mother and son thought wistfully of the missing jewel as they glanced around them on the fair, familiar landscape, all unchanged since Joan and Arthur had sat together on the fragrant mound, with the Burnet-roses all about them, and the purpling heather at their feet.

"Sit down, and rest, mother," said Mr. Warrendale, as they reached the well-remembered spot, and he placed her carefully on "My Lady's Throne." At that moment he did not wish to see Ruby occupying the seat which had once been her sister's. Mrs. Warrendale was soon made comfortable, while her son and Ruby found pleasant resting-places at a little distance from her, and Arthur occupied himself in naming the distant lakes, mountains, and some of the nearer peaks and cliffs across the Channel, till his pupil began to understand the topography of the district.

But Ruby was too full of girlish animation to sit still long, however lovely the scene outspread before her. She feasted her eyes for some time on the fair expanse of mountain, shore, and sea, and then she began to collect a bouquet of the heather which that year grew in unusual abundance. Suddenly she exclaimed, "I do believe I see a spray or two of white heather! I must go and gather it myself. No, Mr. Warrendale, please let me get it with my own hands; I love scrambling, and I could scarcely make a false step in these funny little hollows, all heather and crumbling rock. Don't you know the Scottish superstition, that it is the greatest luck in the world to find a piece of pure white heather, and that the finder communicates the good fortune to whomsoever he or she presents it?"

Now, Arthur did not perceive the blossom of good omen, for the sun was just touching the summits of the rippling crags across the bay, casting a dazzling light upon the heath and on the shore beneath. In a moment her light step had carried her to the other side of a grey, weather-fretted boulder, and she was busy plucking the rare milk-white bells which clustered among the deep purple blooms that grew just there in loveliest profusion. He was following her, when she exclaimed loudly—"Oh, what is this? Here is *treasure-trove*, indeed! Is this *flotsam* or *jetsam*, Mr. Warrendale? It cannot be either, I should say, as it is up here, dry and high above the water-mark." And Ruby came forward with the brilliant circlet hanging on her finger.

"This is good luck indeed, if there be such a thing as luck!" cried Arthur, astonished. "Come here, mother, and see what Ruby has found! something a little more valuable than the white heather! That is an old and treasured heirloom of the Warrendales, Ruby; where was it hidden away? Oh, the weary hours I have spent in searching for it!"

"It was round the stem of the very sprays I chiefly coveted, just at the root; and the crumbling rock was all about it. It was in detaching the heather that I felt something hard that slipped round and round as I touched it, and when I moved some of the little bits of limestone,

I saw the flashing of the diamonds in the sun's rays—*they are diamonds, are they not?*”

“That they are, and very fine ones, too! We attach an almost superstitious value to this ring, I believe, for it is one of our most prized possessions, and it has been in the family ever since the days of the Tudor sovereigns, one of whom presented it to an ancestor or ancestress of ours—I think the latter.”

“I am so glad I found it. Why, it might have lain there for a century if I had not chanced to spy the pretty white heather among the purple!”

“It might, indeed! Your white heather has really brought us good fortune, Ruby.”

“How did it come here? Were you wearing it?”

“No, but it fell from my careless fingers when I was showing it to some one else. I will tell you the history and mystery of the Warrendale circlet ere long, Ruby.”

They went home together very soon in the lovely summer twilight, and when Arthur and his mother were alone, they felicitated themselves on the wonderful and unexpected discovery.

“We will not call it luck,” said Mrs. Warrendale, musingly, as she watched the brilliant gems flashing once more on her own white hand; “let us rather believe the finger of Providence pointed to the spot. Christian people should never talk of such a heathenish thing as *luck*! I am afraid, Arthur, we have been very foolish about this heirloom of ours! It is such a relief to me to have it safe again, that I am half ashamed to think of it.”

“You have had trouble enough since it was lost,” he answered; “but that was all my fault. I am afraid, mother, I have been a great care to you ever since the circlet was missing.”

“I will not say, my dear, that I have not been deeply grieved and disappointed. Perhaps I needed a little humbling; I was so proud of my son, who had never in all his life given me one moment's anxiety, that I scarcely gave him credit for any of the faults and weaknesses of other men; I thought he was to be fully trusted to judge for himself in every event of life. Nor am I sure that I was not myself to blame—Joan—dear Joan was—*is*—so com-

pletely to my satisfaction, so exactly the woman I wanted for *my* daughter, that I exerted too great an influence in the matter. You knew you were pleasing me—you thought you were pleasing yourself."

"I did, indeed. But, mother, I wonder now how I ever could have deceived myself—how ever I could have mistaken the profound esteem and brotherly affection I felt for Joan for the deeper, more fervent love a man conceives for the one woman in the world whom he covets for his own. If I had seen Ruby first, I should never have fallen into so grievous an error."

"I believe you, Arthur. It was a wretched blunder; but I trust no one will be the worse."

"And you think Joan will be happy?"

"I do. It was a great trial to her to discover the transfer of your affection, but she was both too good and too wise a woman to suffer her life to be what people call 'blighted' for any such reason. She has fought, and she has conquered. It was the real thing with her, if not with you. Love came to her with all the greater strength and intensity because she was a woman of matured character. Ruby, dear little thing, will not love you yet awhile as Joan did. I am not quite certain that she has the same deep nature. Her love as a wife will grow, for I think in every moderately happy marriage, the woman's love steadily increases as time wears on. A young girl's love is very sweet and charming; but it lives and thrives on very meagre diet, though many men, I am aware, and some of them older than yourself, prefer the half-opened bud to the more expanded rose."

"Still, mother, you would not counsel me *not* to marry Ruby—if she will have me?"

"By all means win her if you can!—and I think you can, if you do not take too much for granted. Ruby is not so sweet to me as Joan, I confess; but it is you, not I, who seek a partner for life. And it is a blunder I trust to avoid, making my own choice that of my son! On that fatal rock some very fair, well-chartered barques have come to shipwreck. The man who lets his mother choose his wife must be little worth any true woman's acceptance."

"In the years to come I trust Joan and I will be as dear brother and sister. My only trouble is, that I cannot, except indirectly, minister to her temporal comforts. It pains me to think of living here in affluence with Ruby, while she is left to a life of toil and comparative indigence. I wish she would let me surround her with every luxury."

"That could not be. Joan would not be Joan if—for many years at least—she would accept anything from you. I may be able to do something—very guardedly. My greatest comfort is, that Joan in any position would work, and would be wretched leading a life of pleasant, aimless ease. No, I am not afraid for her; she will be prosperous and she will be happy. God will bless my brave, good, noble Joan, I am well persuaded."

I have described Joan's courtship somewhat minutely; I shall leave my readers to imagine that of Ruby. It will be quite enough to say that before the summer ended, and while Joan and Brenda were still enjoying their pleasant holiday at Lindenfield, Ruby wore the long-lost betrothal ring of the Warrendales, and Joan was satisfied that her child's happiness was, as far as human foresight could discern, *secured*!

Ruby herself was the first to stipulate that the marriage should not take place that year. She must go home, and spend the remainder of her maiden life with "Mammie," and help her and Brenda in their daily tasks as long as it was possible. A girl of Joan Carisbroke's training could scarcely be otherwise than unselfish.

Cousin Gregory was delighted to hear of his "little girl's" prospects, and he insisted on the wedding taking place from his house, remarking that he had always wanted to preside at a marriage-feast, and here at last, in his old age, was the very opportunity! And when the time drew near for the sisters to return to London, he began to propose that they should give up their school, and come and live with him at Lindenfield.

"For I want you to get well acquainted with the place, Cousin Joan," he said. "I feel that my days on earth are numbered, and I do not see that I can do better than leave you to be mistress here when I am gone. There is no one else who has a better claim—no one who could reasonably

or unreasonably feel disappointed at your succession to the estate. Though I don't mean to pass over Richard Patterson and his children; he is a good, kind man, and has been honest and honourable and open-handed ever since he was a boy. A few hundreds will be useful in the business, notwithstanding that the old man in the Borough must be richer than many people guess; and I should like to leave a small legacy to each one of Rick's young daughters. It is a good thing for women to have something of their very own, so that they need not marry for the sake of a living; or, if they do marry, it is well for them to have something—be it ever so little—tied securely upon them, that a wasteful or a luckless husband cannot spend. Another thing—I have put by £6,000 to erect a Congregational church at the edge of the park, and I should like you, Joan, to build a comfortable, suitable 'manse' for the minister. When a church is built, a minister's house ought to be built. I have no opinion of saints that stint their minister! The church *must* be built, for it's all provided for; but the manse I leave to *you*, Joan. You will attend to it, I know?"

"Surely I will see that everything is done as you desire; but I hope you will live to build the manse yourself, Cousin Gregory. And as to coming here, we *could*, of course, dispose of the school, and leave Chestnut House at Christmas—that is, if Brenda will consent."

Now, Joan only spoke of Brenda's acquiescence as a mere matter of courtesy, for Brenda was apparently further than ever from having a mind of her own. She was always most anxious to carry out Joan's plans and to endorse her opinions; but she was little more than the echo of Joan's expressed convictions. Joan, therefore, was naturally much surprised when Brenda, instead of giving her usual ready affirmative, blushed crimson, looked first at her sister, then at Cousin Gregory, and at last faltered forth: "I don't know! I am not sure I could come here. It is very good of you, Cousin Gregory; but, you see, I must think—I must talk to Joan."

"Talk away, my dear," was the reply; "though I cannot see what there is to talk about. Unless, indeed, you are going to steal a march on Ruby, and get married before

her? You cannot be so crazily fond of governessing; I will leave you to 'talk' now—the sooner the better. I am tired, and want my regular forty winks."

"I cannot think how you will take it!" began Brenda, when they were left alone. "I hope you won't put me down for deceitful?"

"You deceitful, my dear Brenda! I know better than that. But what is the matter?—you are crimson to the roots of your hair, and your eyes are full of tears. Why should you not come here to live, Cousin Gregory's intentions being what they are? I must confess, I accept them on my own account with unmingled thankfulness, for I am grown very weary of keeping school. It is hard work, at the best, and I am not so strong as I was before my illness; besides, school-keeping takes so much out of one! I am sure it makes one prematurely old. Why should we not live here, and do all that Cousin Gregory desires?"

"Well, I will tell you, Joan, and as I am sure you will know what I *ought* to do, I will leave it to you to decide. You remember how Laura, and even Maud, laughed at me about Mr. Duncan Macdonald? I really did think he liked me; but I thought no one could really *want* to marry me, I am so naturally dull. I put it quite out of my mind when we left St. Brelade's, and then your illness and other things seemed to sweep away almost the remembrance of that delightful time in Guernsey. But while you and Ruby were here in the spring, Mr. Macdonald came to Chestnut House, and downright asked me to marry him. He is not young, you know—past forty; but, then, I am just thirty-three, and he said he had never seen any one who suited him so well as I did, and if I would come and rule as mistress over his home—half farm, half manor—I should make him completely happy."

"And what answer did you give him, Brenda dear?"

"I said that it could not be—and, indeed, felt like that then—he came just when I had rather more on my hands than I could manage. After he was gone, I wondered whether I had not been rather too precipitous, for I began to think I liked him a good deal, and that home of his he talked about had always seemed to me the pleasantest place I ever saw. But he was gone, and I resolved to

think no more of him and to keep his proposals a dead secret."

"Well, dear, and what next? You did think more of him, I imagine."

"Why, you see, he wrote several times—nice friendly letters they were—but I could never make up my mind to mention them to you. And so the half-year came to an end, and yesterday I heard again, and—and he renews the offer. What had I better do?"

"My dear Brenda, no one can decide that point so well as yourself. Do you care for him enough to marry him, and for his sake leave all else? If you do, I see no reason why you should send him away. Agnes always said what a kind-hearted man Uncle Duncan was! Cousin Gregory's intentions certainly make a difference in one way; here is your lasting home if you prefer it; there is nothing now to tempt you to marry for the sake of a satisfactory establishment if you do not really love Mr. Macdonald."

"I don't know about *love*! But I should not like to vex him, or to let him go away for ever; and now I come to think of it, it would trouble me very much if he married any one else."

"Then, my dear, my advice is certainly that you should marry him yourself."

"But will you not be very solitary when Ruby and I are both married and gone?"

"I hope not. I shall find plenty to do. While Cousin Gregory lives I shall have him for friend and companion, and it will be pleasant to help him in carrying out the plans he is so fond of discussing. Lavinia talked of sending her eldest girl to England to be brought up; and now that I am to have two married sisters in our own country I may hope for nephews and nieces nearer to me than her children and Maggie's, to say nothing of poor Frank's little Ethel, whom I shall take as soon as Chestnut House is fairly given up, if Cousin Gregory does not object. There is plenty of room here for a well-appointed nursery establishment, and I always think the whole moral atmosphere of a house is sweeter and more healthful for the presence of a child. I could not have a nursery at

Chestnut House—I can have one here, and I know the Misses Cook will not be sorry to be relieved of their responsibility. Oh! I shall have no end of work to do. I see before me, if God grant me strength and wisdom, a wide field of useful, happy labour. Aunt Joan will come to be the most important person in the family.”

So that affair was settled; and at first it was proposed that the two weddings should take place together. But Brenda wished to be married very quietly, and Cousin Gregory was bent on a grand wedding for Ruby. They would be incongruous brides, too. Brenda said she could not, and would not, be attired in conventional bridal array. Duncan would not care to see her in white satin and orange blossoms, though Cousin Gregory was kind enough to say the wedding dresses should be his special care, and both sisters should be treated exactly alike. Joan quite agreed with Brenda; it would be pleasanter, and in better taste, for each marriage to be separately solemnised.

It was decided at last that Brenda should be married a few days before Christmas, and from the home which had been hers for so many years. Ruby's wedding was not to be celebrated till April in the ensuing year, and then they would all be together at Lindenfield. For it was made a special proviso in arranging matters with Mr. Macdonald that he should bring his wife to Lindenfield as one of Ruby's wedding guests.

After this, the only thing to do was to make haste back to Chestnut House, and for the last time resume duties there, also taking speedy steps for the disposal of the school, which had now become an establishment of importance. Before Michaelmas the whole business was concluded; the English governess who had taken Joan's place during her convalescence would be only too much pleased to succeed to the Misses Carisbroke, provided the requisite funds could be obtained; and we need scarcely say the sisters were not at all disposed to make hard terms with their less fortunate assistant who had been invaluable to them in their hour of need. Finally, it was agreed that Mademoiselle should join forces with Miss Armer, and Joan and Brenda took all possible pains to secure to them every present and future advantage.

In the second week of December the three sisters were free of Chestnut House and all its responsibilities. Joan and Ruby waited only till Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald had departed on their wedding-tour to remove themselves and all their personal belongings to Lindenfield, where Cousin Gregory received them with infinite satisfaction, thanking God, who had given him in his solitary old age the blessing of good and loving children. From that day forth he treated both Joan and Ruby as his daughters. He made a regular pet of the radiant, lovely Ruby; but it was easy to see that Joan was the darling of the old man's heart.

April saw Ruby a bride, and then Lindenfield was gay, indeed! Ruby's bridesmaids were Laura Clarke and Agnes Macdonald; poor little Ethel Carisbroke, much improved both in health and behaviour; and Richard Patterson's three young daughters, all of whom comported themselves most satisfactorily, considering what *very* juvenile bridesmaids they were; but they enjoyed themselves wonderfully, and will never forget to their dying day the grandeur and dignity of their position on Cousin Ruby's wedding-day.

Fully a dozen years have passed since then, and Ruby is a prosperous, happy matron, with healthful, blooming boys and girls about her knees. Her marriage has been all that her tender sister-parent could have wished; that little episode of "Arthur's blunder," as both Joan and Mrs. Warrendale call it, has never been related to her, and she has never even remotely guessed it. The two who were in the secret, old Margery and Mrs. Clarke, never by word or hint betrayed their trust; only Margery—still an authority in the Dunham Tower nurseries, says now and then to the elder Mrs. Warrendale:—"And I was right, after all, ma'am! The moment I knew those two lost that ring between them, I knew they would never be man and wife. And 'tis better as 'tis, isn't it, ma'am? The instant I set eyes on Miss Ruby that was, I says—there's our young master's wife, the very one that Heaven meant for him. And as for Miss Joan, I think she is the very happiest and the handsomest middle-aged lady I ever saw; she is far too good to be monopolised by *one* man; she must have been designed to be a blessing to every one

about her—men, women, and children. Laws, ma'am, the world would never go on properly, if there was not a few such grand old maids as Miss Carisbroke of Lindenfield! What would the children do without their 'Aunt Joan'? not to speak of all the make-belief nephews and nieces, that seem to spring up by dozens and call her 'Auntie,' nor to mention the school children at Lindenfield, that she is doing her best to make into good Christian men and women."

As for Mrs. Bray, she is matron now of one of Joan's own excellent training-schools for girls; she can never quite repress her triumph when Mrs. Arthur comes to Lindenfield; for didn't *she* foretell the match, even before the two ever saw each other!

Laura Clarke is married, too, and her mother and Joan spend a good deal of time together, either at Eland Lodge or at Lindenfield. Dear, good Cousin Gregory passed to his rest about three years after Ruby's marriage. He lived to see not only the church, but the manse perfectly complete, and an earnest, devoted minister happily settled in the pastorate. And the church, with its tall, graceful spire, and beautiful memorial-window, is Cousin Gregory's monument. Joan presented the clock in the tower, and Ruby gave the full-toned organ. Afterwards, when the schools were finished and opened, Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald added, as their gift, a fine harmonium.

Let us look for the last time at Joan—still, and always to be, Joan Carisbroke.

It is a beautiful summer evening, and Joan and Brenda also are at Dunham Tower. Ruby, as lovely as ever, and more beloved than when she first became a wife, is walking in the park with her husband and her eldest daughter Joan; Brenda, rather too stout, doubtless, for grace, but looking wonderfully proud and content, is on the lawn playing croquet with her two stalwart boys. "Papa" is near at hand, watching the progress of the game, and as his sons loudly declare, unfairly giving his advice to "mamma," so she is *sure* to win. "Papa" is getting elderly now, and his hair is tolerably streaked with grey, but Brenda privately thinks no man in the land is fit to compare with him. Arthur Warrendale, handsome

and stately as he looks, is nothing to Duncan ! But of course, she does not say so to Ruby, nor even to Joan, nor to the dowager Mrs. Warrendale.

That dear old lady and Joan are sitting quietly at an upper window, watching the sunset beauty of the landscape, and the happy group upon the lawn, and Mrs. Warrendale says, "Joan, you *do* look happy."

And Joan replies, "I thank God I am happy. I wonder if at this moment England holds a more peacefully content and happy woman than Joan Carisbroke."

"And you never regret that things went as they did that summer, how many years ago?"

"Thirteen—or fourteen, I forget which. No, indeed, I am most thankful, most grateful that Ruby is Arthur's wife, and that I am 'Aunt Joan.' I wish half the girls in England could know my little story. It is such a mistake to suppose that an unmarried woman cannot be quite happy; and a sad mistake, too, to imagine that because one's heart is once sorely wounded, it can never cease to bleed. There are other things in this world than marrying and giving in marriage. Wedded love is the holiest, and must be the sweetest thing in the world, but it is not all of life, and cannot possibly be the portion of all women. I wish I could make some girls, some whom I have known, understand that a thwarted love is not necessarily a tragedy. Life is so rich and so full, if one will only take the blessing God gives with both hands, instead of pining for those He withholds, or, it may be, takes away. And there is *work* for all, and in His work there is always rest and happiness. And Ruby, too, she is fulfilling her appointed destiny; God meant her for wifeness and motherhood, and He meant *me*—oh! for a thousand things! No single woman need be a solitary woman, while there are the poor to succour, and children and young folks to train, and friends to help and love, and God's cause to advance—the highest joy of all!"

"I am so thankful your life was not spoiled," responds the elder lady. "Had it been, I should always have blamed myself for the part I had in the affair."

And Joan replies: "Do you think we have any right

to let our lives be so spoiled ?—we, who are not our own, —whom Christ has redeemed from the curse and the power of sin ? Our lives are given us to make the very best of, in God's service, and for His glory. And after all, how short a space is this earthly term of ours, compared with the never-ending ages we hope to spend with Him, with energies such as we cannot here conceive of, serving Him day and night, perfectly, without ceasing, and praising Him for all the blessings of the life below, and seeing *then* all the turnings and windings of the way along which our Father's hand has led us."

THE END.

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